



POLITICAL CONTEXT IN NAYANTARA SAHGAL NOVELS

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Abstract:

Nayantara Sahgal stands out as a distinguished novelist whose work seamlessly blends social, political, and personal dimensions with artistic finesse. Renowned for her perceptive portrayal of Indian political life, her narratives trace a coherent trajectory from the final phases of the Indian freedom struggle to the political fragmentation of the mid-1970s. A close examination of her novels reveals a deep engagement with contemporary political realities, underpinned by a steadfast commitment to fundamental ideals and principles. These values—often central to her thematic concerns—are foregrounded through her strategic use of historically significant settings, which serve both to affirm their importance and to express her disillusionment over their erosion. This paper seeks to critically examine the representation of social, political, and moral values in Sahgal novels highlighting the author's nuanced critique of India's post-independence socio-political landscape.

Key words: Emergency, Freedom for Women, , Political beliefs, Political Violence

Literature is an art form, and the creative writer has vast resources. The theme of metamorphosis runs throughout literature. It is about taking something and transforming it into something new yet identifiable. So, politics may be the subject topic, but only as raw material. Literature does not simply inform readers what they already know, but also allows them to consider what they didn't realize they knew. It is not a matter of avoiding problems, but rather of conveying them skillfully.

Political issues were explored in all forms of writing. Poems were written on political subjects, while plays dealt with political personalities and national political landmarks. Fiction, more than any other literary genre, expresses the most intimate awareness of the context in which it is produced. It can be interpreted as civilization thinking aloud and focusing on its own sinews. Fiction, as a creative process, documents the evolution of

society's creativity. Thus, the evolution of fiction and the evolution of society's consciousness of the societal apparatus are simultaneous and intertwined.

The political fiction is about a current political crisis that has arisen from personal intrigue. It's about political favors, payoffs, kickbacks, and relationships. Political novels contain names, relationships, and circumstances that are known because they are based on facts and real events. The plot of such works progresses, revealing layers upon layers of basely driven and poorly manoeuvred intrigues and counter-intrigues.

Sahgal's insider experience as a member of the elite - niece of Jawaharlal Nehru, cousin of Indira Gandhi - enables her to challenge and investigate the decline of the democratic ideal in the post-Independence era. In her writings, she has tracked the growth of democracy and politics in the country, from its promise of equality and freedom to its current credibility issue. Her writings sprang from a historical and political consciousness. As a political author, she closely replicates the current political landscape. She expanded the scope of the political novel, broadening its substance and introducing a new dimension. Politics is not merely the preoccupation of politicians in her books; it has a pervasive impact on all levels of existence. And, as a political journalist, she covers the most recent political developments and debates in her daily pieces, emphasizing morality in political life based on Gandhian ideas.

Nayantara Sahgal's *This Time of Morning* is set in contemporary India and stands out as a nuanced and well-crafted narrative. The novel operates on two interwoven levels. On one hand, it portrays the evolving sociopolitical landscape of India following the departure of British colonial rule. On the other, it explores the personal and ideological journeys of modern Indians who must navigate their futures within a society undergoing rapid transformation in its values and traditions. The narrative is largely filtered through the perspective of Rakesh, a dynamic young officer in the Foreign Service, who returns to Delhi after six years abroad. His reintegration into Indian political life coincides with his immersion in the complex and often ruthless power dynamics of governance. Central to the political tension in the novel are two key figures: Kailas Vrind and Kalyan Sinha. Both men symbolize opposing but legitimate ideological forces shaping post-independence India. Vrind, a product of Gandhi's influence, embodies a humanistic and gradualist approach to national development. In contrast, Kalyan Sinha, a self-made man who has risen from poverty to become a prominent U.N. delegate and the Prime Minister's chief spokesperson, champions swift and assertive progress. However, his ambitious methods lead to questionable political alliances and ultimately, his downfall. Beyond the political narrative, the novel also delves into social and domestic spheres, highlighting the changing roles of women who challenge traditional expectations and the identity struggles of Indian intellectuals educated in England. Sahgal's work thus provides a multifaceted examination of a nation in transition, reflecting both its internal conflicts and its aspirations.

Storm in Chandigarh delves into themes that were only briefly touched upon in Nayantara Sahgal's earlier novels. It portrays the disorientation of a nation caught between two conflicting generations—the aging leaders grappling with a sense of obsolescence and the restless youth eager to forge ahead. The novel captures the tension between these groups, highlighting the generational divide that shapes the political and social climate. At its core, the novel addresses the rise of populist, regional, and regressive forces intensified by the government's

policy of linguistic reorganization of Indian states. Sahgal illustrates how this policy contributes to the emergence of a combative political culture, beginning at the state level and gradually influencing the central government. References such as the “Congress cracking up” and “the clash of personalities” where “no issues [are] left, only squabbles” (Storm, p. 24) firmly anchor the narrative in the post-Nehru political era. Through *Storm in Chandigarh*, Sahgal examines political instability and its broader implications, while continuing her exploration of freedom in its diverse forms. Her work draws attention to the deeper malaise afflicting the nation, offering a critical reflection on India's socio-political condition during a period of significant transition.

The novel primarily addresses the political tension and violence arising from Chandigarh's status as the shared capital of Punjab and Haryana. As a newly formed city, Chandigarh has witnessed the emergence of a distinct social fabric, shaped by the diverse cultural backgrounds of its residents. These individuals, having migrated from various regions, have brought with them differing beliefs, customs, and ideologies, leading to a climate of social confusion and cultural upheaval. This cultural transformation reflects the broader impact of modernity, particularly in shifting attitudes toward morality, education, dietary practices, gender relations, and romantic engagement. Notably, the women characters in the novel defy traditional expectations and seek autonomy beyond the domestic sphere. Mara, for instance, openly engages in flirtation, smoking, and drinking, including consuming whiskey in the presence of men—behaviors traditionally viewed as transgressive. Similarly, when Inder offers a drink to Vishal Dubey, Saroj asserts her agency by requesting a drink for herself. Her discomfort at being advised to abstain from alcohol during pregnancy further illustrates the clash between conventional norms and modern sensibilities. Through these portrayals, the novel highlights the evolving gender dynamics and cultural tensions in a rapidly changing urban society.

In *Storm in Chandigarh*, Sahgal presents five principal characters, with the narrative unfolding across both personal and political dimensions that run concurrently. Rather than progressing toward resolution, the political climate depicted in the novel continues to deteriorate. Individuals who uphold values or ideals are portrayed as passive and detached, lacking the resolve to confront the challenges of their environment. In contrast, those who are assertive and politically active are shown to be devoid of principles, driven instead by opportunism and a disregard for ethical conduct. The city of Chandigarh, envisioned as a symbol of a fresh start, becomes the backdrop for mounting political unrest. Vishal Dubey, one of the central characters, finds himself entangled in a tense political standoff where Gyan Singh manipulates linguistic identity by associating it with religious sentiment, exploiting communal emotions to further his personal ambitions. His inflammatory rhetoric poses a significant threat to the city's peace and social harmony, yet no one steps forward to oppose it. Dubey is perplexed by the intensity and irrationality of the confrontational politics he witnesses. He recognizes that violence in this context serves as a tool of political coercion—an instrument of blackmail that has proven effective in the past and is once again being employed. He comes to view violence as a product of both aggressive agitators and the passive bystanders who enable them. Ultimately, Dubey interprets this violence as a manifestation of urban frustration and disillusionment.

In *Storm in Chandigarh*, the city of Chandigarh serves as a symbolic landscape, representing the turbulence and unrest that characterize both the socio-political and personal spheres. The political violence arising from the

conflict between the newly created states of Punjab and Haryana finds a parallel in the domestic tensions between the characters Inder and Saroj. Their troubled marital relationship reflects a form of internalized violence rooted in patriarchal dominance, with Inder's authoritative role within the household contributing to the discord. Within this charged setting, Vishal Dubey becomes acquainted with two contrasting couples: Saroj and Inder, and Mara and Jit. Saroj, who is also the cousin of Nikhil Ray, represents traditional expectations confronted by changing gender roles. Both Inder and Jit are portrayed as young industrialists based in Chandigarh, with Jit notably involved in the whiskey business. The two men share a common past, having endured the trauma of the Partition during their youth. Now, they find themselves witnessing yet another political division—the bifurcation of Punjab—at a time when they are actively engaged in contributing to the construction of a modern, planned urban center. As noted in the novel, “Both had experienced the traumatic partition in their youth and now watch a further bifurcation of the state just when they are participating in building everything anew in the planned city of Chandigarh” (*Storm*, p. 9). This observation underscores the ironic tension between the promise of renewal and the persistence of division, both in the public and private realms.

All things considered, *Storm in Chandigarh* reflects the author's underlying anxiety over the swift decline of Gandhism in social and political life. In addition to successfully transforming the political issues of the 1960s into fiction, Sahgal also captures the political climate and intrigues of the post-independence era in this work. She triumphantly exposes the politicians and bureaucrats who bear the burden for the shift from slavery to freedom, but who are now split along disgusting hypocritical lines rather than on principle or conviction.

Nayantara Sahgal's *A Situation in New Delhi* (1977) offers a critical examination of the Indian political landscape following the end of the Nehruvian era. The novel presents a compelling portrait of post-independence India, marked by political decay, opportunism, and moral decline. The character of Prime Minister Shivraj serves as a fictional parallel to Jawaharlal Nehru, embodying the values of idealism, integrity, and national vision. Through Shivraj, Sahgal constructs a figure who symbolizes the anti-colonial struggle and the post-independence hope for democratic renewal. As the narrative notes, he was “a symbol of the fight against colonial rule, a hero who had resurrected a legend so much of Asia shared and given it modern meaning” (*Situation*, p. 6). Shivraj's leadership, rooted in personal authenticity and ethical governance, contributed to a period of ideological synthesis in independent India. His innate sense of justice informed both policy decisions and personal relationships: “He was just—himself—and that was what he presented to the public. That was what he gave to policy, as well as to close relationship” (*Situation*, p. 8). His capacity to articulate visionary ideals and inspire collective action is also emphasized: “He could convey whole visions and possibilities and get people to work for them” (*Situation*, p. 8). However, following Shivraj's death, the political fabric of the nation begins to unravel. The novel explores the disintegration of the values he upheld and the subsequent rise of a self-serving political class. Characters such as Devi, Usman, and Michael represent an earlier generation of principled politics, grounded in nationalist struggle and ethical commitment. Yet, in the absence of Shivraj's guiding influence, their value-based ideology appears increasingly obsolete. They are disillusioned by the opportunism of the younger politicians—individuals who once revered Shivraj and were

mentored by him, but who now readily compromise on matters of principle for personal gain. The narrative thus critiques the erosion of idealism in Indian politics, portraying Shivraj's death not only as a personal loss but also as the symbolic end of an era defined by integrity and vision.

There is a notable autobiographical flavor in the book. In the book, Devi is a perfect replica of Sahgal's mother, Vijay Lakshmi Pandit, who was going through a delicate period of uprooting during the post-Nehru era of Indra Gandhi's rule. The Emergency time is when the disillusionment peaks. Vijay Lakshmi Pandit and her daughter Sahgal were plagued by Devi's dilemma. In her autobiography, *The Scope of Happiness* (1979), Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit also spoke of her suffering. In their novels, the mother and daughter have both attempted to respectfully express their sense of alienation. Sahgal in her novel and Vijay Lakshmi Pandit in her memoirs. Dislocation is a recurring topic in both of these pieces. In *A Situation in New Delhi*, the narrative centers on the evolving political attitudes within contemporary Indian society. The novel presents the central conflict of modern times—the clash of ideological goals—in a nuanced manner. It distinguishes between two opposing groups: one driven relentlessly by a desire for rapid progress, and another guided by humanistic values and ethical concerns. Within the political sphere, even the concept of progress is often treated as a means to consolidate power rather than an end in itself. The characters Usman and Rishad, despite belonging to different generations and exhibiting contrasting temperaments, are both portrayed as individuals marked by imagination, commitment, and a deep sense of civic engagement. While they recognize the necessity of societal transformation, they differ in their approaches, emphasizing the need for awareness and meaningful participation in the process of change. The core of the debate, however, shifts from emotional response to an interrogation of the values that underpin political action. The new generation of ministers, who claim to advocate for progress, promote a form of class-based rhetoric—positioning themselves as champions of the poor and the marginalized against the wealthy and powerful. Their pride in this stance is portrayed with irony, as if they believe they have single-handedly invented the concept of social justice. The novel thus critiques the superficial appropriation of progressive ideals devoid of genuine ethical commitment.

Following the death of Shivraj, the nation is confronted with a profound leadership crisis, resulting in a significant power vacuum. The successor to the Prime Minister lacks the vision and qualities that defined Shivraj's leadership, and even Devi is shown to be devoid of the necessary leadership capabilities. This theme of political void and the consequent instability recurs across Sahgal's body of work. In *Storm in Chandigarh*, a similar absence of leadership follows the death of the Home Minister, leading to the emergence of morally corrupt and morally unfit individuals, such as a sexually predatory leader who ascends to power after the demise of the Petroleum Minister. Sahgal's fiction consistently explores how India's elite grapple with the challenges brought on by political transitions. As one of the pioneering Indian women writing in English to gain significant recognition, Sahgal is notable for her critical engagement with the nation's political realities. *A Situation in New Delhi* has been described as "fact-based fiction," reflecting real political developments through a fictional lens. Beneath the surface narrative of political events lies a deeper, teleological structure—suggesting that the novel's true meaning is embedded in the intricate interplay between political action and personal passion, all unfolding within a purposeful historical trajectory. The novel portrays a broader sense of national fragmentation, as

disintegration gradually descends into chaos and disorder within the capital. Ultimately, *A Situation in New Delhi* offers a sweeping portrayal of the Indian political landscape, reflecting both its systemic failures and the moral dilemmas facing those in power. Another significant political upheaval addressed by Nayantara Sahgal is the declaration of the Internal Emergency in 1975, widely regarded as the most severe political crisis India faced since gaining independence. The state of Emergency was officially proclaimed on 26 June 1975 by then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. By the early 1970s, particularly around 1973, public dissatisfaction with Indira Gandhi's leadership began to grow, as the promises made by her government—especially those aimed at addressing poverty—remained largely unfulfilled. Despite the widely publicized slogan “*Garibi Hatao*” (Eradicate Poverty), little tangible progress was made in reducing rural or urban poverty or economic disparity. Compounding the public discontent, the global oil crisis of 1973 led to a dramatic fourfold increase in crude oil prices, which in turn caused a sharp rise in the cost of petroleum products and fertilizers. These inflationary pressures severely impacted both the lower-income and middle-class populations. The country was soon engulfed in economic recession, rising unemployment, inflation, and shortages of essential goods. These conditions triggered widespread industrial unrest, sparking a wave of strikes and protests across various regions during 1972 and 1973.

Sonali's steadfast commitment to ethical governance faces a harsh reality check when she refuses to approve a license for a questionable joint venture between India and a multinational American corporation. The proposed project involved manufacturing a fizzy soft drink called *Happyola*, which essentially aimed to import an entire factory—clearly violating the government's economic policy that discouraged foreign collaboration in industries during a period focused on national self-reliance.

Despite official policy, the company's representative, Mr. Neuman, had received personal assurance from a government minister that the proposal would be approved. Shocked to find the project rejected, Neuman approaches Sonali, assuming a clerical or administrative error. He attempts to justify the project by highlighting the importance of offering safe, quality consumer goods in a developing country like India, especially as part of the company's broader expansion plans in Asia. However, Sonali firmly reiterates that the government's objective is to promote self-sufficiency by discouraging the import of unnecessary foreign goods—what she terms “infancy goods, but ours.”

Yet, Sonali appears unaware of the deeper political shifts brought about by the declaration of Emergency. As the narrator critically observes, the Emergency had significantly distorted national policies, transforming India's image from that of the world's largest democracy into something resembling the very autocratic regimes it once viewed with disdain: “The Emergency had given all kinds of new twists and turns to policy, and the world's largest democracy was looking like nothing so much as one of the two-bit dictatorships we had loftily looked down upon” (*Rich like us*, p. 64).

The novel functions as an extended allegory for modern India, with particular emphasis on its historical and political relationship with Britain. At its core, it portrays how the Emergency of 1975 undermined the democratic ideals upon which the nation was built and had long upheld. The strength of the novel lies in

Sahgal's ability to weave together a wide range of themes, including sati, corruption, religion, colonialism, the *Ramayana*, the Partition, and contemporary politics—making the work a rich tapestry of interrelated ideas and reflections. As a vocal critic of her cousin Indira Gandhi, Sahgal does not hold back in her condemnation of the Emergency or of the preferential treatment given to Sanjay Gandhi, who was elevated to a position of considerable influence. However, in keeping with her allegorical approach, Sahgal never explicitly names either Indira or Sanjay Gandhi in the text. Instead, she refers to them obliquely as “Madam and her son,” allowing her critique to resonate symbolically while remaining subtly detached.

Plans for Departure is set in India during the year 1914 and offers a vivid portrayal of the country's difficult socio-political conditions through the lens of a foreign traveler. The novel follows Anna Hansen, a bold and independent young Danish woman, who arrives in India and takes up the role of secretary to the esteemed scientist, Sir Nitin Basu. For Sir Nitin, the unexpected arrival of this tall, fair, and progressive European woman at his secluded Himalayan retreat in the summer of 1914 feels almost like an intrusion. Anna, a forward-thinking feminist far ahead of her time, is on a year-long journey before her planned marriage to a British diplomat. During her stay in the fictional town of Himapur, she encounters a series of intense and transformative experiences. She finds herself on the brink of falling in love with another man, becomes entangled in what appears to be a hidden crime, and is deeply disturbed by a mysterious and unsettling death. Through Anna's perspective, Sahgal explores themes of colonial tension, gender roles, and personal awakening against the backdrop of pre-independence India.

The small European enclave in Himapur is composed of several distinct characters, including the zealous missionary Marlowe Croft, whose relentless ambition is to construct a Christian church in the hills. His efforts, however, are continually thwarted by his own wife, Lulu—a harsh and unintelligent woman who becomes the primary obstacle to his mission. Another key figure is Henry Brewster, the district magistrate, a complex and enigmatic man who feels disconnected from the colonial power structure he is meant to uphold. Brewster remains emotionally entangled with his estranged wife, Stella, who left him despite his having sacrificed a promising political future in England for her. His lingering obsession with her continues to haunt him. Anna Hansen finds herself drawn to Brewster and, as she becomes more engaged with the rising political tensions in India, she begins to question her own future. However, a tragic accident and a shocking discovery in a forest glade force her to reconsider staying. With many questions left unresolved, Anna prepares to leave, as the private dramas of Himapur are overshadowed by the outbreak of World War I. *Plans for Departure* thus unfolds as both a poignant love story and a suspenseful mystery, set against the backdrop of a continent on the brink of revolution and a world inching toward global conflict. The novel captures the political climate of the time with remarkable depth and sensitivity, blending compelling narrative, subtle humor, and finely detailed observation to create a work of haunting beauty and literary finesse.

The European community in the fictional town of Himapur is made up of a few notable individuals. Among them is Marlowe Croft, a determined and obsessive missionary who is intent on building a Christian church in the hills, despite facing constant resistance from his own wife, Lulu—a stern and unintelligent woman who becomes the main barrier to his goal. Also part of this small circle is Henry Brewster, the district magistrate, a

reserved and enigmatic man who feels uneasy with the colonial role he has been assigned. Brewster remains emotionally attached to his estranged wife, Stella, for whom he abandoned a promising political career in England, and he continues to be consumed by his lingering love for her. Anna Hansen, the Danish protagonist, becomes intrigued by Brewster and increasingly involved in the rising political unrest in India. These experiences compel her to reassess her life and future. However, a tragic accident and a disturbing discovery in a forest glade make it impossible for her to remain in Himapur. Plagued by unresolved mysteries, she begins to prepare for her departure, just as the personal dramas of Himapur are overtaken by the looming devastation of war. *Plans for Departure* blends elements of romance and mystery, set against the backdrop of a politically volatile India and a world on the cusp of World War I. The novel offers a vivid portrayal of the era's political climate, crafted with literary skill, nuanced humor, and keen insight, making it a deeply moving and powerful work

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