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Depiction of Culture and History in Nayantara Sahgal's Novels

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Abstract

The Indian National Movement was one of the largest and most popular mass movements in world history through which entire country for united bringing independence and restoring civil rights. Education, the boycott of foreign clothes and liquor, the promotion of Indian industry were some of the issues in the nationalist movements. Compulsory primary education, the lowering of the taxation on the poor and middle classes, the reduction of the salt tax were some of the major demands made by the Indian National revolutionaries. It mobilized the youth, women and men of different castes and classes into political action and brought a mighty colonial empire to its end. The country struggled to free itself from the shackles of colonialism. National leaders like, Surendra Nath Banerji, Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Jawaharlal Nehru, Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose, Lala Lajpat Rai and Mahatma Gandhi Accepted that India was not a fully structured nation and thus their objective was to promote the growing unity of the Indian people through a common struggle against colonialism. Keeping in view this political and historical scenario, and attempt is made to interpret the past, culture and history in the two major novels of Nayantara Sahgal, *Rich like Us* and *Plans for Departure*. Both the novels adequately deal with these major themes.

Keywords- *Novels, Culture, Colonialism, Emergency*

Nayantara Sahgal is a leading woman novelist who has tried to interpret the Indian's past history and culture in her novels. She has drawn a graphic picture of the colonial past of India. Its main historical events related to the rule of two hundred years of the British in India. She depicts the political and economic exploitation of Indians by the colonial ruler. Her novels can be called political-historical in this respect. In this paper, I wish to analyse this aspect of Sahgal's selected novels.

Colonialism or colonial consciousness is in itself a term which needs to be defined. It depicts the political situation, domination of one nation by another nation, the way of exploitation and lack of commitment on part of human beings involved. Colonialism means

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to control the places and the countries by the powerful and dominant classes as the British made India and many other countries a colony. Anti-colonialism means to fight against colonialism and colonizers and make a space of one's own, to again freedom and to get the rights which has been lost.

Historians interpret the past because every generation finds new reasons for reviewing its past. History is important because it defines our culture. It has been more than sixty years since Britishers went away, but the distance in time and space has not dwindled Nayantara's views and ways of speaking and narrating things politically. Sahgal highlights some of the events of past history. With time she has become more insightful. She explores what Nehru, Gandhi and other leaders has said for the reconstructed and deconstructed history. Her novels portray Indian society and social ethos. The characters of her novels were the witness of the political upheavals of the political scenario.

Nayantara Sahgal is attached to this history through the overlapping of her youth with this period in Indian history. She is the first Indian woman novelist in English who deals with the historical and political themes in an effective and impressive way. Sahgal witnessed the scenes of the Indian freedom movement which were happening all over India. She grew up watching the leaders of the movement. She saw them going to the jail frequently. Her parents struggled against colonial powers and her uncle Jawaharlal Nehru frequently visited prison cells. She was nurtured on the ideals of her maternal uncle Jawaharlal Nehru and of Mahatma Gandhi. She has portrayed Indian social world the different periods in history where different forms of political and social exploitations have persisted and that various strategies of resistance evolved by the common people.

Surrounded by such stalwarts, their works and personalities, she has expressed many of these situations in her novels like *Storm In Chandigarh* (1969), *Rich like Us* (1985), *Plans For Departure* (1986), Events Like Satyagraha movement, Gandhi's Salt March, Lahore conspiracy case, hunger strikes, non-cooperation them. *Mistaken Identity* (1988), *Lesser Breeds* (2003) are set in the surroundings of colonial India. These novels depict the political unrest in India and the historical struggle for independence and the fight against colonialism. In her novel *Rich Like Us* (1985), she discusses historical experience of that period 1975-1977, its political unrest and disturbances. She responded to the social changes which took place in the environment where common people got united and fought against Emergency. She highlights those common people through various characters in her novel who were behind the scenes and were not famous leaders but they sacrificed their life for the betterment of the country. In *Mistaken Identity* (1985) Sahgal shows the right phase of the time period in which the story is casted i.e. the time of British rule over India. The novels *Storm in Chandigarh* (1969) depicts that the people were uprooted by the bifurcation of the Punjab. Sahgal attempts to capture the important political events in the context of Gandhism. In this context, Lakshmi Sinha says, "Sahgal's literary world ... in a broad sense can be termed

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‘personalized fiction’. History, politics, autobiography and personalities intermingle in the novels of Sahgal”. (Sinha, 42) A clever intermingling of history and fiction can be recognized in Sahgal, gradually journeying from her first novel, *A Time to be Happy* (1957) up to her latest one, *Lesser Breeds* (2003). Sahgal emphasize on some important events of the India Nationalist Struggle led by Mahatma Gandhi.

The present paper relates to Sahgal’s two novels *Rich Like Us* (1985) and *Plans For Departure* (1986) where Sahgal exposes the undue suppression of the freedom of people. *Rich Like Us* (1985) is considered to be one of the most engaging, aspiring and complex novels of Nayantara Sahgal. The novel is dedicated to the “Indo-perspective is that European traders first reached Indian shores in search of lucrative spice trade. Later on Dutch and English also set up their factories in India. In 1835, English was made the medium of instruction in India’s schools. British people sought to get rid of exploitation and corruption of caste system, child marriage and the sati system. Western educated Indian elite was also against these issues. Britishers brought many new things t India like transportation system, telegram system, railway system and most importantly the education system but on the other hand they started domination most of the subcontinents and they disfavoured local customs and this led Indians to fight for the freedom of their country. *Plans for Departure* (1986) refer to the historical events of the first two decades of the 20th century. It captures the magical influence of the writings of Bal Gangadhar Tilak on the exploited Indian against the background of Europe’s internal disturbances in the First World War This Novel registers an important stage in her growth as a novelist. It takes the reader back to the colonial past and presents a picture of the subcontinent poised for revolution and disturbance in the backdrop of the world on the edge of cataclysmic World War I.

Rich Like Us (1985) portrays several Indian families of the 1970’s as it deals with the most disturbing political, economic and cultural changes that developed during this period. The novel concerned with the presence of upper-class during Emergency. The novel highlights many issues – the accumulation of wealth, injustice to the poor, the role of women over the years, political situation, Indian family values, patriarchal society, the injustice meted out to people during Emergency, and so many others. The Protagonist of the novel, Sonali and Ravi Kachru, Rose and Ram Mona and Dev, belong to different class and category. They belong to different generations. The story moves from pre-independent India of the 18th and 19th century curbed by tyrannical British rule and was hit by social evils like sati system, casteism, and untouchability. Sahgal highlights the moral In this novel Sonali, the young female Indian civil servant struggles to find truth and logic in her ever-changing homeland, India. Like Sonali there were many women who had shown resistance to stay in patriarchal society.

Plans for Departure (1986) a significant part of history (1914) is presented as the experience of a Danish spinster, Miss Anna Hansen. The novel presents the themes like man-

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woman relationship, Status of woman, east-west encounter, British imperialism, Indian National Movement. The catastrophic war of 1914-1918 centered in Europe was the period when the whole world was on the brink of collapse. Anna witnessed the memorable but doleful picture of the troubled times. Sir Nitin says That Miss Anna journeyed from Denmark to India and was asked “Why was she here at all” (Plans For Departure, 16)? It is because she decided to travel to India to explore her own self. She has come to India for self-realization. It is her desire for self-realization that he postpones her marriage to an English diplomat, Nicholas. The beginning of the novel shows her relation with Nicholas, involvement with the suffragette movement, her home in Denmark. The suffragettes makes her aware of both the courage and dedicated to bring about political change” (Recritiquing Women’s Writing in English, 90). This awareness prompts her to learn more about Indian demands for Independence. “After I read Hinduism,” Said Anna, “I Suddenly say to me, in my next life I hope I am a man. But it is too long to wait, so I set myself free in this life.” (Plans For Departure, 55) Her journey to India is an assertion of her need to grow. She had decided not to be born a man but she wants to create more space around herself Anna Hansen relates her external experience to internal growth.

Departure becomes a unifying metaphor in the novel. Anna emerges as the symbol for the struggle for change; the novel shows the structural unity. Henry is the first to plan his departure. “There was a time a few years ago when I was ready t quit, he tells Anna but Stella was against it”. Ironically Stella is to depart and her departure clouded with mystery heralds other departure. “Clouds of mystery around the departure of Stella and the death of Mrs. Croft became the immediate cause for Anna to plan her departure”. (M.G. Hedge. 139)

From these two novels, it can be concluded that how Sahgal has reconstructed the history of the world and India. She finds many valuable common features in the different parts of the world such as the oppressed people fighting for their country’s freedom. She depicts the Indian national struggle, its goals, sacrifices made by the people. It is important to revise the history to discover these very significant events, personas, sacrifices made by several brave Indians. She also analyses the undercurrents of corruption and wrong values which have persisted in Indian society. All the past is not beautiful; some ugly aspects are there which needs to be recognized and redressed.

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