



Book Review

Maninder Sidhu. *Nayantara Sahgal: A Century of Political Insights*. Routledge, 2023

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Any assessment—critical or purely literary—of contemporary writers entails perusing a wide frame of their filiations and affiliations, their worldview, attitudes to history, society, national cultures, and more importantly, their response to how and why they write about what they consider urgent and inescapable. It is in this sense that Nayantara Sahgal's work and its intrinsic value ought to be seen, for there are few writers who have consistently wrought their oeuvre with compulsive issues which have shaped it, and the shifts in history, time and space with their contingencies that have equally transmuted it. Before going further, I recall what Milan Kundera said about man and existence in *The Art of the Novel*:

Heidegger characterizes existence by an extremely well-known formulation: 'in-der-welt-sein', being in the world....Man and the world are bound together like the snail to its shell: the world is past of man, it is his dimension, and as the world changes, existence (in-der-welt-sein) changes as well.

And a little later, Kundera expresses himself profoundly on history and historical circumstances: "Not only must historical circumstance create a new existential situation for a character in a novel, but History itself must be understood and analysed as an existential situation." It is perhaps appropriate to state that Sahgal's tryst with history and change—more specifically the pre- and post-independence Indian political history and the shifts from colonialism to democracy—are the core of her fictional and non-fictional corpus with all the complexities and positive/negative cross-currents that

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continue to underline those shifts. Yet Sahgal's own involvement with modern Indian political and cultural ethos, as is too well known, have been intellectually intertwined, given her own 'filiation and affiliation' that have compulsorily driven her towards creatively chasing the course of historical watersheds and their existential fallouts.

It is imperative in any study (including the present one), to attempt an in-depth analysis and articulation of the synthesis between aesthetics and politics, and the way Sahgal constructs her novels to fathom the quintessence of the latter for a writer/artist. With her archival memory, ancestral legacy and graphic ability to recall the long march of India towards freedom, through her intimate bond with Gandhi and Nehru among other players of the Movement, Sahgal's credentials as a writer expressly connect her to politics and political reflection. Through writing, she identifies the role of those who shaped the pre-and post-independence political realities, positive and unpalatable for the human world she realistically frames in her work.

In a memorial lecture, delivered at the Punjabi University almost a decade back, Sahgal delved into the 'Politics of Fiction' and shared her personal views. For Sahgal, writing essentially comes out of one's history, geography, and the emotions and sensations these arouse. What she calls a 'political consciousness' includes the outer framework of our lives, not only how we are governed, but the beliefs and ideas, thoughts and realities that rule our psyche, and more importantly, the kinds of people we become as a result of owning and disowning them. Political awareness, thus, for Sahgal is the way we involve ourselves in the world around and within us. Aforementioned 'political consciousness' finds reification in her fictional characters, the social and cultural scenarios in which they exist, and the characters' attempt to adapt. Maninder Sidhu's multifaceted exegesis of 'political insights,' aptly highlights Sahgal's credo which includes the general outer environment in 'politics'—the social, economic, cultural and emotional influences we experience. Further, it also covers the actual political set-up we live in, and its fallout on existence. There are many occasions when Sahgal has strongly defended her own works and of others for overturning ruling ideologies—structures of dominance and civil injustices perpetrated

in the name of majoritarianism and right-wing political practices. Here, it is sufficient to say that Sahgal with a literary career spreading around seventy years has earned both praise and criticism, and has never been far from controversy.

Sidhu's monumental critique encapsulates nearly all political issues and imperatives, while critically assimilating complex nuances of literature, historical shifts, cultural mutations and theoretical ensembles to place Sahgal's works of fiction and non-fiction for evaluating her engagements with events and dilemmas that have shaped contemporary South-Asian realities. The impressive study covers a wide range of Sahgal's compulsive subjects for interrogation and critical overview. Among these, the most outstanding ones that have crystallized in her quest for understanding are: the colonial/post-colonial/neo-colonial/ trans-colonial discourses that have acted as 'complex determining forces of history'; her turning to a range of discourses from different cultures, histories and traditions; the assertion of imbibed legacy of 'rooted universalism'; her deep veneration for Gandhian thought, Nehruvian socialist vision of free India; her disgust with Indira Gandhi's authoritarianism and style of governance; her vehement opposition to Emergency and its inhuman practices, illustrated in *Rich Like Us*; her depiction of soulless, mindless and philistine middle classes in post-independence Indian set-up; and finally, her deep unease with Hindutava nationalist discourse. The present study judiciously marks the *raison-d'être* of her early and latter works. The early ones—*A Time to be Happy*, *The Day in Shadow*, *This Time of Morning*, - encapsulate the rise and ebb of euphoria of a nation transcending from colonialism to freedom, as they delve into the troubled and variedly imprisoned female psyche and identity. Her focus shifts to a penetrating insight into regional politics (bifurcation of Punjab), mutating shades of marital relations and bureaucratic power tilts in *Storm in Chandigarh*. *Situation in New Delhi* is a thinly guised praise for Nehru's statesmanship and personality, and the political vacuum staring at the nation after him. *Rich Like Us*, a tirade against the imposition of Emergency, also exposes the stark contrast between the ideologies of Nehru and Indira Gandhi. It foregrounds a major concern of Sahgal: the attempt to colonize the nation through industrial and marketing projects by global/Western bigwigs, corruption in public life and the slow

disappearance of socialism in favour of rampant capitalism and materialism. Interestingly, Sahgal focused her attention on colonial history in her latter works that followed: *Plans for Departure*, *Mistaken Identity* and *Lesser Breeds*. The informing themes coalesce 50 years of the independence struggle. These works masterfully highlight the civil injustices, political unrest in India; the lopsided, ambivalent response of the educated class towards non-violence; the cultural/racial syncretism that illustrated the redeeming power of humanism and much more. Rightly so, Sahgal's most influential phase of writing enabled her to handle a host of sensitive issues with detachment and ironic objectivity. Sidhu's study places her non-fictional texts *Prison and Chocolate Cake*, *From Fear Set free*, *The Freedom Movement in India*, *Indira Gandhi: Her Road to Power*, *Jawaharlal Nehru: Civilizing the Savage World* as valuable informative narratives about India's crucial phases in modern history and politics.

Before I conclude, it must be acknowledged that Sidhu's book that places Sahgal at the crucial juncture in modern history of Indian English Writing simultaneously connects the writer's intellectual and ideological concerns with theoretical conceptualizations, which have paved the way power is perceived and resisted. Moreover, author correlates Sahgal's work with Frantz Fanon, Edward Said, Habermas, the New Historicist approach and the feminist core, reflecting the multi-layered arguments in her theory. Fanon, for one, had warned in *The Wretched of the Earth* against the moral bankruptcy of the emergent post-colonial middle class, which he feared would only appropriate the former colonizer's methods to negate the struggles of the masses in achieving freedom in Third World societies. As Sahgal has portrayed in *Rich Like Us*, the mimicry, greed and selfish interests of the middle class along with the affluent class conspired against socialism and equality. On the other hand, the New Historicist method, where literary texts are placed within the frame of historical texts to project them as 'historicist' rather than ahistorical, balances the textuality of history against the cultural specificity of literary texts. Sahgal's texts too enable a parallel reading of Indian History and its perforation through aesthetic representations.

The concept of 'Orientalism', wherein Said critically examines the inter-disciplinary epistemologies of power, race, culture, imperialism, history, and subversively and minutely studies the East-West relationship, is a political strategy for colonial expansion, for establishing the European cultural perspective as a norm. Likewise, the 'contrapuntal method' evolved by Said to analyse colonial cultural practices in *Culture and Imperialism* is a tool to excavate rich pre-colonial history and traditions. Said's advocacy of 'reactionary' reading is aimed at filling the 'gaps' and 'silences' deliberately imposed on native identities in Western literary texts. What connects it with Sahgal's works such as *Mistaken Identity* and *Lesser Breeds* is Said's call for the intellectual to remain connected with political realities for representing the suppressed to uncover silenced histories of the marginalized through political fiction, something Sahgal has been striving in her opposition to neo-fascism, cultural uniformity and religious harmony in the contemporary Indian context. The section "Intellectual Intertexts", comes out as the high point of Maninder Sidhu's critical capacity to handle a host of highly complex theoretical positions about philosophy, language, culture, history, psychology and multiple discourses with ease, erudition and aplomb, which in turn expand, amplify and intellectually justify Nayantara Sahgal's vision and world view as a writer, her literary and political activism, her constant crusade and struggle with the forces of oppression and power that make her(with this brilliant study) a writer to be engaged with by academics, scholars and researchers in the present and future.