Theme of Socio-Political Consciousness and Political turbulence in Nayantara Sahgal’s *A Situation in New Delhi*

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**Abstract**

This paper aims to attempt the analysis of Socio-Political Consciousness and Political turbulence in Nayantara Sahgal novel *A Situation in New Delhi* and which are also deals with the problems of women in the patriarchal society. *A Situation in New Delhi* is indeed representative of the situation in the whole of India. Public spirited attitudes and socially conscious idealists have been pushed out by the unscrupulous, self-seeking and power-hungry politicians. Leaders of Shivraj’s stature have been reduced to ciphers. The spirit of Shivraj, however, survives and continues to inspire the general public and sensitive individuals who are willing to serve the people with a sense of mission and in a spirit of dedication.

**Introduction**

*A Situation in New Delhi*, based on fact. Its main character, Shivraj (never actually met in the book), is clearly a roman-a-clef of India’s first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru.
Sahgal is, in fact, the niece of Nehru. The novel commences with an announcement of Shivraj’s death in the English press. Michael Calvert, an English biographer (based on Nehru’s biographer, Michael Brecher) and former president of India, is moved enough by his friend’s death to return to India and write Shivraj’s biography. It is at this point that the reader can make certain assumptions about what is to follow. We are either about to embark on a retrospective journey of Shivraj’s India through Calvert’s eyes, or we are to see modern India (circa 1964) in the aftermath of Shivraj. It is in fact the latter, though not in the way we first imagined.

Mrs. Sahgal’s use of history in this novel is constructive and idealistic. “There were eras and characters in history in whom public and private issues met and became one.” If Shivraj provided the example for this idea in the past, Devi and her two friends stand up to it in the present. As a political novelist, Nayantara Sahgal is concerned with examining her country in the light of India’s political and social changes during the post-war period. In *A Situation in New Delhi*, she attempts to do this in 165 pages. This is ambitious, and not completely successful.

At this early point in the novel, the focus shifts from Calvert to Devi, Shivraj’s sister. She is the Education Minister in the cabinet of the new Prime Minister (Nehru’s sister, Vijaya Pandit, was a minister in the post-Nehru Shastri government). Devi feels politically impotent in the period following her brother’s death and is seen to question the direction her country is taking. Her son, Rishad, a student at Delhi University, also seeing stagnation in the new government and its policies, is involved in a covert terrorist group whose aim is to undermine...
the social order through random acts of violence and terrorism. Their aim seems to be to create a new society from the ashes of the old. Before this central plot gathers momentum there is a feeling of ennui from the character of Devi that permeates the novel until this point. It is not until the activities of Rishad become clearer that we begin to feel a sense of involvement with the characters and their actions. At one third of the way through a 165 page novel, this takes far too long.

The “situation” in New Delhi is essentially the student unrest at Delhi University. A small group of students, clandestinely led by Rishad, is involved in acts of violence against the University in general and the Vice-Chancellor of the University, Usman Ali, in particular. Usman recognizes that part of the reason for the student unrest at the university is that every job requires a degree—thus there is outrage if any student is expelled or denied a place in a university. More importantly, from Rishad’s point of view, there are gross injustices in India which are fuelled to a great extent by the caste system:

Within the socio-religious framework of India, strong divisive influences such as caste, the status of untouchability, and linguistic chauvinism operate. The influence of caste is a strong element in the novel. The character of Pinky, and the preparation for her arranged marriage, exemplifies, and to an extent satirizes, the caste system. Rishad suggests that, despite Shivraj, equality can never be attained in India while this system exists:

They would never banish the contrasts, never in ten thousand years build an equal society. How could they, when they were products of the rot themselves, of caste, of vested interests and stinking old ideas? (P-67)

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Usman also recognizes the problems of a caste system. He points to Shivraj’s “pedigree”-Shivraj (and Nehru) was of the Brahman caste and Usman suggests that this background must have ultimately influenced every political act that Shivraj had undertaken. Although this novel was first published in 1977 and should be seen to an extent as a reflection of this time, problems of caste are still an issue in India. This brings in Nayantara Sahgal’s own life and circumstances as relevant while considering her novels. All her childhood was spent in Anand Bhavan at Allahabad with her parents, her maternal uncle, Jawaharlal Nehru and her cousin, Indira Gandhi. She grew up during the national movement. The family was so deeply involved in the freedom struggle that the political and the personal were inseparable in such an environment and it left a deep impression on her mind. Mrs. Sahgal clearly states that.

...the political situation is the background of all my books. I notice that nobody else in India, at least writing in English, has used the technique of having a political situation—a specific political situation as the backdrop of every single novel. There have been novels of political situation, isolated ones, but I have developed this as a genre, as a whole style of political novel, which uses political background but tells a story of human life against that ...” (P-10)

Sahgal suggests that India is a country in constant revolution. She also suggests that there are “good” and “bad” revolutions. The passive revolution of Shivraj is contrasted with the violent revolution of Rishad. It is when Usman assumes the mantle of revolutionary leadership left vacant by Shivraj that there is an indication of hope for the future. Rishad’s

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tragic death suggests a movement that is doomed from the start-doomed because of its clandestine nature. The suggestion is that if a revolution is to be successful, it must be a popular groundswell led by a charismatic leader in the style of Gandhi or Nehru.

Sahgal shows us a country caught between two worlds—the ancient and the modern. Michael Calvert describes India as a “staggeringly old country” “old and settled and structured when Britons were painting their bodies blue.” (107). The tribal fanaticism of Pinky’s arranged wedding is contrasted by the worldly cynicism of the guests at her engagement party. Rishad describes India as being caught between “ancient myth and industrial present.” The technological changes brought out by the policies of Nehru, and the assimilation of socialist principles cannot eradicate three thousand years of culture. This is why the revolution of Rishad must fail. Only that revolution which can work within the cultural framework of India and its social history can have any chance of leading its people to a greater equality. This is ultimately Sahgal’s message.

Hence, Situation in New Delhi, Nayantara Sahgal affirms: “the whole novel began with my curiosity and interested in the Naxalites who were just then, quite a force. This is in 1971 I am speaking of when I made a visit to Calcutta.” The Naxalite movement and its influence on the students of the University of Delhi and other young people plays an important role together with the personal drama of Devi, the education minister, Usman Ali, the Vice-Chancellor, Michael Calvert, an English writer and Rishad, the brilliant young son of Devi. The political and personal themes interact on each other by bringing out the interrelation between the characters and the situations.
Along with the activities of the Naxalite movement, Sahgal also introduces the problem of student unrest and indiscipline that sprung out of the unrealistic and non-feasible policies and programmes of government. He repeated warnings in her previous novels about violence becoming a Leviathan to the administration through constant provocation are presented here objectively as episodes. This novel also forewarns that in order to tackle this violence, the authoritarian Government will seize the opportunity to lead the country towards dictatorship.

Dictatorship in India has tried to hide its malevolent appearance behind the façade of demarcate socialism, according to Nayantara Sahgal. The political set up remains tense due to the mishandling of the high-ups in the Government after the death of Shivraj, the charismatic leader of the nation.

A follower of non-violence as a positive force in forestalling all political deadlocks, Nayantara Sahgal has painted Shivraj on the model of her uncle, Pt. Nehru, the epitome of democratic thoughts. The novel is nothing if not idolatory resurrected Shivraj, the magician, the lion-hearted, worshipped by everybody, in every corner of the world, for whom an Englishman weeps unashamedly and a Muslim pledges devotion until death. A gigantic figure in the realm of politics, indeed! and yet, with all this adding up to a string of hyperbolic epithets, hardly a human character, suitable for dominating the reader’s mind.

The novelist herself, ironically, has become the victim of the personality cult and if she disapproves the votaries of political figures who are steeped in fanaticism, her description of Shivraj’s motive in politics and his relations with his sister, merit no better judgment. He
wanted to live long enough “for free institutions to become part of the soil.”

(93) How mature and experienced a politician was Shivraj? He trusted the present Mineral and Metals Minister, took him in as a compromise to avoid a rupture in the party and also “because he thought this one was all right, good material for training.” (93) And all this proved to be quite the wrong judgement because this is the very man, who according to Devi is her most potent enemy and biased against all democratic functioning.

Shivraj’s artificiality weakens the whole basis of characterization in this novel. Being too near the material and having too strong feelings about it, the novelists loses the objectivity, lucidity and clear-headedness that are so important in portraying characters as these. For they are public property and in a sense, prisoners of their own popular periods. Shivraj does not only show his inability to come out as a charismatic personality, his spiritual presence reduces Devi to no better a position than that of a Devadasi.

A woman like Devi, possessing all the romantic and practical qualities needed to project a fully developed personality does little better than attending various parties, attending to her cosmopolitan lovers and carrying on a shallow, bantering relationship with her only son Rishad. When Michael asks Devi “What outlet is there’ for instance, for Rishad?” (P-92). She replies “I don’t know. What would you do in his place?” (P-93)

The naivete of a mature woman like her is inexcusable to say the least, and she is the education minister. As an education minister, she forgets about the violent uprising of the students in the university in which the Vice-Chancellor nearly loses an eye and rises next morning complaining about the air conditioner, talking loftily about its symbolic significance.

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In normal circumstances, her phone would be ringing half the night and she would be on her toes, anxious and distressed, instead of asking her son over a leisurely breakfast: “can you tell me something about it?” (P-19)

At the crucial cabinet meeting over Usman Ali’s report, Devi, “the woman who knows how to exercise her mind and who has been trained by Shivraj with strong discipline” (P-129) utters three sentences with the wrong implication and “wanted to put her face down on her arms and weep.” (130) Why indeed? For the simple reason that she is a puppet who is beautiful enough to grace Shivraj’s gatherings and who takes pride in the fact that Shivraj “urged me, like a command, to ‘be happy’.” (P-87) She, on her own, does not contribute a single political thought, all are echoes of Shivraj. When Usman Ali refuses to accept the Vice-Chancellorship, her only plea, like a damsel in distress is “I need your help.” When Usman Ali urges her to leave her job and come out with him, indecision gnaws her mind:

But it is peculiar at forty-four to find yourself stripped of your fabulous past and your limitless future. Suddenly you’re nothing. Even what I have of my present in the way of a reputation-something that people recognize and respect will be blotted out the day I walk out of this house. (P-162)

In spite of all her tall talk, Devi is a typical, domesticated Indian woman, who needs a crutch always to lean on. When Shivraj dies, she needs Usman body And soul, who makes love to her as she lies on her bed, mourning for her husband Ishwar. As soon as Michael arrives, he realizes that need, especially after Rishad’s death, and he cannot get away, for “to remove himself from Devi when she needed him would be like tearing flesh.” (164). Even

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Ram Murthi runs her life because she recognizes her inexperience to shift the important from the trivial. After all, a minister is a responsible person, representing the interests of her/his countrymen in adult, intellectual gatherings but our Devi, poor thing, knows how to shimmer in white or talk tiredly of the glorious past and, of course, about Shivraj. Even in her love affairs she is neither honest nor mature, nor selfish. Ishwar’s bed is still warm when Usman Ali occupies it. When Michael asks her about her lovers, she gives an answer ambiguous enough “which didn’t quite seem to answer the question.” (50) She must have sensed the agony of Nadira, but imperiously brushes it aside and makes Usman Ali cheat Nadira by saying “I am not Devi’s lover” (136) and bringing in bitterness in his married life.

The novelist portrays the cabinet members in *ASituationinNewDelhi* like Summer Singh, who profess to be radical but are far removed from the millions of their country. They have nothing in common with the people even in general. Their political aspirations even do not leave alone a way of life. Devi feels isolated among these men of hackneyed phrases and empty talk. Michael Calvert who revisits India after Shivraj’s death points out his own suspicion regarding the true reasons of his death. He realizes that Shivraj had lost the will to live at the collapse of the value system, he had tried to stabilize into a way of life. But this radicalism of the politicians is alien and sterile. It yields no result. It spares even the young discontented because of its inaction. Rishad, Devi’s young son, joins a Naxalite movement in his desire for social change. There is nothing in common between the radical ministers of the cabinet and the huge masses of men living on the fringe of society, not even realizing that

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they are human beings. Rishad’s own sense of identification with them is not complete and the movement lapses into disorganized violence when Naren is no longer able to guide it.

The young people are involved in their own crusade. It is led by a desire to find purpose and meaning in life like Rishad. They are charmed by the instant success that violence has brought to them. They have their own code of behaviour for violence. It had be clean, cold and disciplined, unaided by motive, by drugs or mental aberration. They want to build an Indian utopia for the poor and downtrodden, without realization that violence even if it spelt action was in the long run self defeating, for the panic and fear it creates.

It is incapable of positive action. They also, like the ruling party, attempt a break with the past, a break which Usman thinks cannot take place. The past could not be destroyed. Sooner or later it flows back. Inspite of its accusers it does not prevent people from learning new things. The only kind of communism acceptable to him is a native Indian communism with its roots in the village and its inspiration drawn from the Indian heritage. Clinging to Shivraj or Nehru or Gandhi serves no honest purpose for a society in need of change. Usman feels the futility of this attitude. Indians found the Swaraj (attainment of freedom) as a terminus but this was not so. Revolutions did not end, they simply continued. They did not get congealed in their tracks or follow beaten tracks. The people had to be willing to change not once but time again. Usman tells Devi: “There never was another way. Besides, do you realize? It’s the only way most people in this country understand and will give their allegiance. (P-10)
For Nayantara Sahgal non-violence is a far more comprehensive attitude than merely a political weapon. It is an active and a powerful force. It may have been ineffectively used on occasion i.e., by a misuse of fast, and the like, but it remains a potent force if used in an organized way. Usman represents Sahgal’s view. He embraces hostility in order to overcome it and:

He did not belong to the breed that needed power in order to do things…..Usman hankered for a village past, for another form of government, one that didn’t would build down, with maximum power to the small community. How else, in India, would exhausted resources, human and natural ever recover their strength (P-11)

In *A Situation in New Delhi* the focus is on political attitudes. Here the conflict of goals which is a central conflict of contemporary society is presented in a different manners. There are two types of people—one group is ruthlessly driven by the progressive urge and the second group is possessed by humanistic considerations. The people in power treat even progress as a means and not an end. Usman and Rishad, men of different generations and different temperaments, are both men of imagination and involvement. Both are conscious of the need for change and the importance of human awareness and participation in this process through their choice of method is different. The whole issue has come to revolve on the values involved rather on emotions. The new ministers swear by progress and believe in class-division: “They were for the poor and the small against the rich and the Big and as proud of it as if they had discovered social justice all by themselves”. (P-21)
But they have no ideas, no imagination and what is worse, no involvement. They are not even individuals but a group. Devi feels completely isolated from the new privilege around the cabinet table, but unable to break away from the party. Usman works openly against them and goes out to build a new future on trust and faith and active participation. He makes it a personal crusade. Rishad also feels concerned and joins the Naxalite movement in his desire to do something about the situation. He and his companions realize that it was difficult even to reach the workers. He also realizes that violence could shock and create panic and chaos. Power could become an end in itself—an aimless terror. He is able to assess the situation but does not feel the full impact till Suvarnapriya, the girl he had thought of, provides a perspective to his views. She made him feel the need for involvement which brings home that revolution begins with oneself not with others.

In *A Situation in New Delhi* the novelist has attempted an analysis of the political situation in its totality. It goes further than any of her earlier novels in its concern for reasons and solutions. It has neither social nor personal problems. It is a novel full of political ideas. It is nowhere connected with novelist’s own experience of politics; but the story is set in the mid-fifties. In fact the political happenings of two decades have been telescoped into less than half the time. The novelist shows her concern not with Devi or Rishad but with the meaning of revolution. She suggests ways for bringing true revolution.

Sahgal starts the novel with news of Shivraj’s death and proceeds to deal with the political situation arising out of it. His own followers and partymen are eager to abandon his policies and commit themselves to the idea of progress. But these men are mediocres and
unrealistic in their approach to the political problems. They are men who had never done anything with their hands. They are more concerned with the idea of progress than with progress itself. Devi, widowed sister of Shivraj, is included in the union cabinet as a mark of respect to the departed leader, though she finds herself isolated.

She feels that the political situation has fully changed. It has lost the sense of direction which was there in her brother’s regime. She even finds changes in her own son, Rishad. She herself has a solution but she is helpless. Usman blames the Hindu apathy and resistance to fresh ideas while Rishad puts forth another view. He feels that the older generation is simply not interested in change. He joins the Naxalite movement to get the public ready for violence. He fails to realize that a revolution in order to be meaningful has to involve the people and begin with oneself. He also does not realize that violence like power can become and end in itself. This is what happens when their leader Naren while hiding gets badly wounded and his long illness makes his group to lose the sense of direction. It is Usman who has to see what has gone wrong. He realizes that revolutions never end and they continue as usual:

Revolution, if they had any meaning, meant putting oneself into the crucible of change. Revolutions went on. They did not get congealed in their tracks or follow beaten tracks. (P-25)

Usman has the courage to do what most people in power are unable to do. He resigns. But this does not mean that he accepts defeat, on the contrary he frees himself from the position of power to provide direction to the student’s agitation. What had been true for him

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and his generation may not be true for the next. He understands the gravity of the situation and plans to act accordingly:

Individual penance for individual salvation, never mind what happened to the word or your neighbor. It was not his particular way, but it was a way. That was how progress and change might be brought about here, by touching the individual readiness for hardship, the personal desire for sacrifice. (P-26)

The character of Shivraj is meant to be based on the character of Jawahar Lal Nehru, the novelist’s uncle. His idealism and his faith in human values, later his sense of frustration at the turn events had taken is true enough. But perhaps it is not possible to project a character faithfully once a given situation is changed to suit the demands of writing a novel. The similarity ends here and in any case Shivraj is already dead when the novel opens. The novelist presents many personalities of the cotemporary political world in their eccentricities and obsessions. She also portrays them in their preference for certain definite political stands.

It is a purely political novel where the different concepts of revolution are examined. Nayantara Sahgal considers her novels to be political in content and in her view each of the novels more or less reflect the social and political era we are passing through. The use of political genre is the main aspects of her novels, the other being the exploration of the religious theme and the problems of women in contemporary society.

Rishad in A Situation in New Delhi is unhappy and dissatisfied with the world around him but he is unable to pinpoint the cause for this. He begins to realize it only when he feels involved with Skinny. Skinny is different, absorbed in her dancing and her studies in contrast
to Pinky, who is busy with her bleaching sessions. But while Rishad is groping for a way and Devi is hoping to convince her colleagues, it is Usman who is truly and deeply involved in the larger issue of life and rejects the idea of progress which bypasses human value.

Despite of, Sahgal describes a different kind of incompatibility through the delineation of the relationship between Usman Ali, the Vice-Chancellor of Delhi University and his wife Nadira. Usman needs a friendship not only with the body but also with mind of a woman. But unfortunately Nadira is not with him in his friendships and loyalties, in the passions of his mind and, heart, in central concern. He feels that she is durable as a ‘mistress material’, but ‘problematic as a wife’ for him, she becomes a mere body without a mind. As Nadira is a voluptuous and languorous woman who longs only for the physical side of the marriage she becomes a mere body without a mind for Usman. In a fit of disappointment, Usman thus blames himself.

There was a peculiar humiliation in not being able to convey your truth, you essential personality to the person who lived under your roof, shared your bed, saw you in all your unguarded nakedness every single day: the person who had more evidence to condemn you than any other had, but who also had glimpses into your striving, your efforts at bravery….Yet really the failure was his Wherever he might have succeeded, with Nadira he had failed. May be she had erected an Islamic fortress around her, imprisoned herself, a princess in a tower.

In Devi, Usman can find what he needs in a woman, intelligence and receptivity, to ideas. But Devi is duty-bounded to Shivraj her brother, and she uses the men in her life only
for her personal survival. It is once again with Nadira that Usman tries to establish the right relationship as she, like Jit in *Storm in Chandigarh*, has the redeeming feature of having a will to understand, even if understanding is not yet there. Though she stays away from him for sometimes, finally reconciles with him and returns to him.

**Conclusion**

In almost every novel Nayantara Sahgal has a central woman character who gradually moves towards on awareness of her emotional needs and reflects the writer’s own life and sensibility like Kusum, Rashmi, Saroj and Simrit. In *A Situation in New Delhi* it is Skinny Jaipal and not Devi who is in direct line to Simrit, Skinny is the new woman whose awareness of herself is not at all self-conscious. She has a passion for the act of living and involves herself fully in whatever she undertakes—in her study of history as a subject, in her learning of the art of dancing and also in destroying her own and her mother’s possessions. She is supremely confident and superior on the stage and equally natural in her behaviour when she accompanies Rishad to Pinky’s party. She has the audacity of innocence with which she combines certain conventionally of behaviour when it comes to taking a lift with Rishad.

The knowledge that she is in love with Rishad descends upon her suddenly and naturally. Not so Devi who has allowed herself to be hedged in by her widowhood. Devi does not come to life inspite of the writer’s repeated attempts to give her vitality. She is too uncommitted to emerge as an individual and is, at forty-four, deprived of both her past and future. She has lived too long in the glory of her illustrious brother’s charismatic hold on

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people and now when she is on her own she finds herself isolated and lonely. Her marriage with Ishwar has left her with only reality the birth of their son Rishad. And her sexual relationships with both Usman and Michael are temporary are based on pretensions which she does not acknowledge. She does not have the courage to defy convention or liberate herself from her fast.

References


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