



Theme of Violence in Sahgal's Storm in Chandigarh

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ABSTRACT :

Nayantara Sahgal is one of the most representative Indian-English novelists of the twentieth century. She is a prolific writer. She has to her credit nine novels, two biographies, two political commentaries and a large number of articles, contributions to various newspapers and magazines. She is a recipient of the prestigious Sahitya Akademi Award for her novel *Rich Like Us*. Sahgal is perhaps the only Indo-English woman novelist who is also a political columnist. She makes a point of keeping in touch with the latest political controversies and her writings are often presented in the best tradition of western liberal journalism. As a novelist her contribution to Indo-English fiction lies in writing novels that mirror faithfully the contemporary Indian political scene. *The Storm in Chandigarh* is one of Sahgal's best political novels. It deals with the problem of political tension and violence between the Haryana. The novel depicts violence, chaos and the uneasy political situation of the late sixties in the partition of Punjab into two newly formed states- Punjabi-speaking Punjab and Hindi-speaking Haryana with Chandigarh as the common capital. The present research paper is an attempt to explain the theme of violence enriched by Sahgal in her novel *Storm in Chandigarh*.

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Nayantara Sahgal is one of the most representative Indian-English novelists of the twentieth century. She has established her reputation both as a journalist and as a novelist. She has so far nine novels and two autobiographies to her credit and has published a number of articles and two other books namely *Freedom Movement in India* and *Indira Gandhi's Emergence and Style*. Her novels present an authentic picture of India after independence. Her personal background explains her sustained interest and involvement in the present-day India. Being the daughter of Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit and the niece of Jawaharlal Nehru, she is very familiar with the politics of India before and after independence and this explains the authenticity of the political situations presented in her novels. She is described as one of our best socio-political novelists today. Jasbir Jain feels that her main contribution thematically has been her deep involvement and concern with politics, especially Indian (Jain, 22). However her absorbing concern with politics is not divorced from her humanistic concern. Her novels portray the various social and cultural changes that took place in India and the individuals' response to them. Sahgal's third novel *Storm in Chandigarh* deals with the problem of political tension and violence between the Haryana. The novel depicts violence, chaos and the uneasy political situation of the late sixties in the partition of Punjab into



two newly formed states- Punjabi-speaking Punjab and Hindi-speaking Haryana with Chandigarh as the common capital. The present research paper is an attempt to explain the theme of violence enriched by Sahgal in her novel *Storm in Chandigarh*.

Storm in Chandigarh is one of the best political novels written by Sahgal. It deals with the partition of East Punjab on linguistic lines just after the state had recovered from the trauma of the 1947 partition. Violence of the sixties becomes the central concern in the novel that deals with the problem of political tension and violence originating from the city Chandigarh, the common capital of the two states - the Punjab and Haryana, and portrays the personal tensions resulting in the failure of marital ties. The theme of the novel is violence, not necessarily physical violence but rather an invisible and more subtle form of violence- the infliction of one person's will on another. Though superficially the novel depicts violence, chaos and the uneasy political situation of the late sixties, it also reflects Sahgal's human spirit in a traditional cultural milieu and its characteristic response of freedom to meet the challenges of change. The novel deals with the political upheaval in Punjab during the post-independence period. Sahgal focuses her attention on the national illness. In this sense, she is authentic in portraying the reality of the political situation. The metaphorical term 'storm' in the title of the novel works at two levels; the one is the political, following on the partition of Punjab into two states, and the second personal or emotional crisis in the marital conflicts between husband and wife. The two backgrounds - the political and the personal run parallel to each other and are well integrated in the theme of her fictional work.

The characters in the novel behave like moderns but, at the same time, they do not isolate themselves completely from their tradition. This blend of tradition and modernity can be observed in their attitude to morality, education, man-woman relations and to love. There are details of complex human relationships against the backdrop of India's current political discontent. Women characters in this novel no more like to remain confined within the four walls of their houses. They prefer to go to picnic and parties in order to get relieved of the burden of boredom and domestic monotony. They don't hesitate in taking whiskey in the company of men. Sahgal demonstrates that violence has spread into social relationships also, especially in relations between men and women which she has consistently explored and commented upon in several novels. The valuable thing about her treatment is that, as she has done in the case of the other aspects of India's social and political life, she traces its roots in the country's past. Besides the political background which has been very well projected in this novel, there is a human background, too.

Sahgal's fictional world is represented by a variety of people, politicians, high-ranking civil servants, and wealthy businessmen with international connections. On the political side the two new



Chief Ministers, Gyan Singh of Punjab and Harpal Singh of Haryana and also the Union Home Minister have figured in it. Vishal Dubey, Trivedi, Prasad and Kachru represent the civil servants. The prosperous textile industrialist, Nikhil Ray and his wife Gauri, the manager Inder Mehra who runs Nikhil's textile company in Chandigarh and his wife Saroj and the liquor manufacturer Jit Sahani and his wife Mara complete the business class.

Harpal Singh and Gyan Singh, the Chief Ministers of Haryana and the Punjab respectively, had been friends and colleagues once, but they are now obliged to make menacing gestures towards each other. The political fissure between Gyan Singh and Harpal Singh took place over state boundaries, water and electricity. The hostile Chief Minister of Punjab threatened to lead a strike at Bhakhra. This situation resulted in a grave crisis in Chandigarh. The novel opens with the Union Home Minister's statement: ***"Violence lies very close to the surface in the Punjab"*** (Sahgal, Storm 7) which reflects the stormy atmosphere in the two states. As the tension mounts up, New Delhi deputed Vishal Dubey to watch the situation at Chandigarh. After a careful appraisal, Vishal backs Harpal and persuades him to accept Gyan's challenge of a general strike. Violence breaks out inevitably and Harpal is wounded and hospitalized. A critic states: "The *Storm in Chandigarh* can be attributed, at one level to the estrangement between Gyansingh and Harpal Singh" (Ramchandraiah 70). The clash between Gyan Singh and Harpal Singh is a clash of ideologies. It is a fight between the cult of violence and of non-violence. Gyan Singh who with little concern for emotions and philanthropist always indulges in a ruthless attitude, Harpal Singh, on the other hand, is philanthropist more concerned with general safety and well-being of people, each time there is a confrontation between the two Chief Ministers. Dubey realizes more than a political battle between them.

Vishal Dubey, the protagonist of the novel is an idealistic and upright civil servant. He displays admirable detachment and endurance when Leela, the girl he married turns out to be an adulteress. Even though he knows it well that she is disloyal to him, he thinks he himself is doing her a wrong by depriving her of her marital right and affection. Talking about Vishal Dubey and his wife Leela, Sahgal writes:

She had selected what she wanted of him: the distinguished escort at parties, the successful civil servant with a promising future, the husband who could be relied upon to take pains with whatever problems she took to him. And she had ignored the rest. She had given herself selectively too, what she had considered it prudent and convenient to give, and left him empty of the reality of herself. Even her vitality had needed an audience. She scintillated in company. Time and again he heard her talk animatedly of what had happened a day or a week



earlier, of an article she had read, an idea she had had, at a party. Alone with him she had little to share. Had their failure been their fault, or was there something at the very core of human dreams and longings that was fatal to fulfillment through marriage (Sahgal, Storm 69).

Thus Vishal's life itself becomes an illustration of the fact that suffering is the mark of such honest people for whom life is a persistent quest for the Higher Morality, which means "a search for value and an attempt to choose the better value, the real value, in any situation, and not just do what's done or what is expected" (*Ibidem* 86).

Vishal's marriage with Leela had turned out to be a vanishing search for communication. They were bound by nuptial knots but had failed to maintain the marital right and obligations in the midst of all odds.

She was dedicated to the cult of conformity, to observing forms that his most intense pleas had not been able to penetrate.... The whole mindless mess going down the ages with never a shaft of new light on it. Men and women contorted into molds, battered into sameness; the divine spiritual spark guttered out.... Somewhere under the sun there must be another way to live, with relentless honesty, where the only cruelty would be pretense. (Ibidem 214)

Throughout their lives, they had remained forced strangers to each other. He is possessed by a deep sense of guilt for living with her without love. He suffers from the tortures of remorse for his relationship with Leela abruptly ending due to her death. Vishal's marriage had been a failure. A widower, he is deriving satisfaction in a liaison with Gaur, a Bengali businessman's wife who finds security in arranged marriage but she needs satisfaction based utterly on physical sex and therefore she establishes a relationship with Dubey.

The novel is the symbolic representation of stormy social and political activity in the background. The political violence between the two newly-formed states is reflected in the personal violence of Inder and Saroj. In Chandigarh, Vishal gets acquainted with two young couples: Inder-Saroj and Jit-Mara. Both Inder and Jit are young industrialists. Inder looks after Nikhil Ray's nylon plant in Chandigarh and Jit is the whiskey manufacturer. Saroj and Inder present a picture of typical traditional Indian family in which womanhood is captivated in the possessive spirit of the husband. Their relationship is purely mechanical and superficial devoid of any feeling of affection and tenderness. "This, the touch without sexual significance, the caress of affection, was different. It cost him an effort to make it" (*Ibidem* 53). His treatment of his wife and children is extremely immodest. He treats them as if they were non-living objects. Inder's problem with his wife arises from his view of the destiny of women which has descended down the generations and as per which she has to live a fixed role pre-determined for her by the male-dominated society. The temperamental



incompatibility causes disharmony in the marriage of various characters in the novel. There are extra-marital relationship among characters which Sahgal portrays through the relations that Mara, Jit's wife, has with Inder, Inder's wife Saroj has with Vishal Dubey, and Gauri, a Bengali Businessman's wife sighing for Dubey, and love. Saroj's pre-marital relationship becomes the cause of the failure of their marriage, which neither Inder has forgotten nor he lets Saroj forget it. Saroj's quest for mutual communication and emotional sharing naturally leads her toward Vishal whom she finds more understanding, considerate, and emotionally responding.

Another couple in the novel, Jit and Mara, also suffers from a similar malady. They are childless couple blessed with all needed comforts of life but even then they suffer from emotional void in their life. The search for communication makes Mara come towards Inder. But soon she is disillusioned when she finds him a hypocrite and subsequently breaks all relations with him. By that time Jit also realizes that there is something lacking in their relationship and attempts to come closer to Mara. The realization makes them be reconciled and remain true to each other.

The novelist's main concern seems to be the depiction of the social life of Indian people living in the post-independence days. The storm is blown off in both planes- the political and the personal at the end of the novel. Sahgal's awareness of the historical and political development in Asia and Europe is quite evident in this novel. The one event that is continually kept in the backdrop is the partition of India in 1947. It acquires a special ironic significance in this novel because of the second partition of the Indian part of the Punjab on the basis of language into Haryana and Punjab with Chandigarh as the joint capital. Thus, the novel depicts the violence that enveloped the free India in the sixties:

The map of India, once a uniform piece of territory was again suffering the pangs of another bifurcation of the two states of Haryana and Punjab, and had become a welter of separate sensitive identities resurrected after the independence. (Ibidem 15).

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