

Mistaken Identity: A Fiction with Intriguing Narrative of Nayantara Sahgal

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Abstract: The narrative style of Nayantara Sahgal's fiction is widely acknowledged for her political inclinations with political ambience of then society with the life and experiences of political personalities of elite class. The novelist's Nayantara Sahgal is one of the great Indian novelists in English. She has published eight novels, six books of non-fiction, and some short stories. Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first prime minister, was her mother's brother, which means that politics is in her blood and her father, a Sanskrit scholar, died of an illness contracted when he was jailed for participating in the struggle for freedom. The novel weaves a beautiful, realistic and convincing fabric of man-woman relationship in a subtle manner. The novelist highlights the significance of a man's influence on a woman's life and the vice-versa. This influence conditions the working of the person's psyche. Bhushan Singh, the narrator and Sahgal's mouthpiece, encounters various women in his life and thus, undergoes varied experiences and reaches maturity towards the end of the novel.

Keywords: culture, emotional, fiction, identity, political

Introduction:

The novelist's Nayantara Sahgal is one of the great Indian novelists in English. She has published eight novels, six books of non-fiction, and some short stories. Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first prime minister, was her mother's brother, which means that politics is in her blood and her father, a Sanskrit scholar, died of an illness contracted when he was jailed for participating in the struggle for freedom. She spent much of her childhood at Anand Bhawan, the ancestral home of the Nehru's in Allahabad. One could say mother, Vijayalakshmi Pandit, was an active member of the Indian National Congress, and went to jail several times. Her novels deal with human relationship, especially women struggling against oppression and injustice heaped upon them in the name of tradition and culture. Nayantara portrays the inalienable right of freedom for women in many of the characters in her novels. As a writer with feminist concerns, Nayantara Sahgal progeny of the tradition where in power itself is defined as goddess 'Sakti', a female symbol.

In the novel 'Mistaken Identity' her concern is with her religion and religious attitudes which she feels go a long way to explain political and emotional stances and also personal relationship. Her concern has been a consistent one though it has received scant attention from critics bogged down as they are by conventional approaches to her work. Sahgal's work cannot be divided in two themes like tradition versus modernity of east-west encounter and I should think the same should be true of most other writers for the simple reason that it amounts to a crier- simplify action.

In this novel, Nayantara Sahgal takes the interwar period especially the twenties and locates the action of the novel in a relatively insignificant princely state called Vijaygarh. Bhushan Singh, the Hindu Prince falls in love with a common Muslim girl and it results in too dastardly communal rights in the state of Vijaygarh.

The narrative style of Nayantara Sahgal's fiction is widely acknowledged for her political inclinations with political ambience of then society with the life and experiences of political personalities of elite class. Her fiction is closely interwoven with the fabric of interpersonal relationships set in the political and social milieu of India. Dimensions of human relationships pervade all her novels and thus need to be examined minutely. Man-Woman relationship holds a vital place in these relationships and the novelist deals with this dimension of relationship with full concern and broad perspective.

The year is 1929, India is torn by strikes, the British Raj is close to panic, and Bhushan Singh, the purposeless but amiable son of a minor raja, is arrested on his train journey home to North India, mistakenly charged with treason, and thrown into jail. His identity is mistaken along with other jail mates and they are detained in jail, lost in the wilderness of the absurd kind of a trial where nothing is certain. For a few years, he stays in jail and introspects on his own life and the situation of his country in religious and social contexts. As the months of awaiting trial stretch into years, the apolitical Bhushan entertains his communist cell-mates with tales of his world; of his veiled and idiosyncratic mother; of his very modern Parsee girlfriend (she wears dresses); of the American flapper who taught him the Turkey Trot; of his forbidden boyhood affair which sparked off two murderous Hindu-Moslem riots and led to his banishment abroad. Around the mystery of his arrest and into his stories Sahgal infuses suspense, gentle irony, and a wealth of Northern India's culture. *Mistaken Identity* is at once a family saga, a romance, a rich historical novel, and, perhaps most keenly, a fable concerning the implacable working of karma.

Nayantara Sahgal's latest novel is *Mistaken Identity*. The novel is a comedy in the tradition of Indian folktales and the Arabian Nights. The representational mode employed by Nayantara Sahgal is irony. Through this device she offers an insightful ridiculing of a society acquiring greater and greater compartmentalization. The question of the Hindu Muslim device is examined from this perspective what is aptly illustrated in the novel through its novelistic technique of the flashback and shifting points of view is that identifying people as Hindus and Muslims would be a heart rending exclusion of their basic identity as human beings. In this novel, Nayantara Sahgal takes the interwar period especially the twenties and locates the action of the novel in a relatively insignificant princely state called Vijaygarh. Bhushan Singh, the Hindu Prince falls in love with a common Muslim girl and it results in too dastardly communal rights in the state of Vijaygarh. The king banishes his son to New York where Bhushan becomes the ideal choice for a role in Hollywood movie of romance and adventure. His longing for love brings him back to India and into the thick of freedom movement. This provides scope for Bhushan, the idealist to plead for the acceptance of interwoven culture viewing an inseparable Hindu Muslim unity. Mrs Sahgal rounds off the action of the novel by effecting an interesting triple union. Bhushan marries Yusuf's daughter, his illiterate mother deserts her polygamous husband and elopes with Yusuf. Sylla, Bhushan's Parsee girlfriend marries the lawyer Lauzer. The importance of the novel *Mistaken Identity* lies in the historical backdrop which it has provided and the historical consciousness which it reveals. Nayantara Sahgal once again shows her ability to offer an interweaving of history and politics in her novels.

Her novel *Mistaken Identity* (1988) illustrates this fact as it lays emphasis more on man-woman relationship inside and outside the ambit of marriage. It also depicts myriad hues of various human relationships. She takes up the gender issues (Child marriage female infanticide, polygamy and equality of women) in Man-Woman relationship (of husband-wife and lovers) and other issues of universal brotherhood with only one religion, that is, of humanity (as depicted in relationships of prison inmates) and other political, social, cultural issues in various other relationships like those of parents-children, lawyer-client and teacher-student.

The novel weaves a beautiful, realistic and convincing fabric of man-woman relationship in a subtle manner. The novelist highlights the significance of a man's influence on a woman's life and the vice-versa. This influence conditions the working of the person's psyche. Bhushan Singh, the narrator and Sahgal's mouthpiece, encounters various women in his life and thus, undergoes varied experiences and reaches maturity towards the end of the novel. Rane, Sylla and Razia are the ones who emerge out sensible modern women because of their interpersonal relationships. Once they meet the right partners of their respective lives, they get a ray of life and hope out of their listless and drab life.

The novelist, thus, promotes man-Woman's mutual love and understanding with due respect to each other's individuality and presence of throb of life in their hearts without confining to futile social and cultural imposition. Sahgal in her novels vividly describes how woman is exploited even during the modern times by both the individuals and the society in the disruption of relationship. Sahgal also traces out a slow and gradual deviation from the stereotype of the virtuous woman to redefine virtue. Sahgal condemns self-immolation and suffering, and points out that the virtue of the modern woman is to build courage to live the life full of freedom and identical. The novelist raised the modern view of women who are in search of full freedom to express their individuality and identity; and ready to fight to get rescue from suffering and injustice. Sahgal's novels deal with men and women in eternal search for freedom-freedom to express themselves, freedom to be their own selves. Sahgal feels strongly about female exploitation and male sarcasm towards the issue of women's identity crises. She demands social justice for women, her focus being on freedom. As woman has been suppressed since time immemorial, she is in need of sympathy, support, encouragement and inspiration for the full blossoming of her character and in the novels of Sahgal, the woman protagonist receives them from a man.

With an admirable steadfastness, she upholds her commitment to man-woman relationships based on mutual trust and honest communication between two equal individuals. Man-woman relationship is the unit of individual and social life and hence it has been the central theme of the novelists all over the world. The characters of Sahgal reflect the changing facets of man-woman relationship in India. Sahgal's intentionally delineated the man-woman relationships with various dimensions. Some relationships are happy and cherishing the conventional values without taking forefront the injustice and cruelty of Hindu orthodoxy to women particularly. In the other type of relationship, there is a strong sense of individuality and an analytical mind, and ready to break the imposed social and traditional walls, accepting modern western values. In her novels, Sahgal reveals the changes in relations with women before and after marriage. Women are obliged to follow strictly the traditional codes. The moment a girl reaches adolescence, she is reminded of her femininity.

The double standards and dichotomous attitude which continue to operate throughout a woman's life start right in her parents' home. She is prevented from developing her individuality. She has shown in her novels that patriarchal power decides the whole life of a girl in the desired direction. She succeeds in convincing us that women are assigned such roles as will best satisfy men's dreams and fantasies about them and thus blasts this malady by presenting women not in their flesh and blood but as men's imaginative projections about them. The traditional feminine virtues and graces are instilled in her so that she could be an attractive commodity in the marriage market. She gets hardly any encouragement to develop her independent individual self. She is always put aside at the time of taking any decision and always has to play secondary and submissive role in her life. In short, Nayantara Sahgal's women are of the view that they should move with the time and they should not compromise with the issue of their individual freedom in our male-dominated society. The feminist in Sahgal always insists on women's equality at par with men.

Almost in all the eight novels, Sahgal has gone deep into the female psyche as far as their relations with male as husband, father, brother or any friendly relations are concern. Husband-wife relationship, alienation resulting from lack of communication,

East-West encounter, extra-marital relationship, existentialist problems and temperamental incompatibility form the major themes in Sahgal's novels. While delineating the man – woman relationship, Sahgal represents new morality, according to which woman is not to be taken as a mere toy, an object of lust and momentary pleasure, but man's equal and honoured life partner. Her *Mistaken Identity* (1988) lays emphasis more on man-woman relationship in marital and extra marital.

While delineating the man- woman relationship in married life, the novelist intentionally highlighted the extra martial relationship crossing the socio-cultural and patriarchal imposed border which seems illusionary and an unacceptable in Indian context. In this novel, Sahgal has delineated the background of Meerut Conspiracy case of 1920s which leads her story of an aimless son Bhushan, who was a minor raja during the British rule when he is charged and put into jail. For a few years, he stays in jail and introspects on his own life and the situation of his country in religious and social contexts.

Bhushan, the male protagonist, has various remarkable relationships with women, which bring about a change in his views and perception. Bhushan calls Razia a wild fantasy and reckons himself her destiny, but Razia has no special feelings for Bhushan. Their affair resulted into terrifying riots in Vijaygarh. Many people are killed and mutilated, but Bhushan stays safe from it all. He is kept at home and then sent first to Bombay and then to America. But he cannot escape the clutches of Razia's infatuation. But Razia forgets the previous relation with Bhushan and infatuates a Turkish diplomat and marries with him. The novel weaves a beautiful, realistic and convincing fabric of man-woman relationship in a subtle manner. The novelist highlights the significance of a man's influence on a woman's life and the vice-versa. This influence conditions the working of the person's psyche. Bhushan Singh, the narrator and Sahgal's mouthpiece, encounters various women in his life and thus, undergoes varied experiences and reaches maturity towards the end of the novel. Ranee, Sylla and Razia are the ones who emerge out sensible modern women because of their interpersonal relationships. Once they meet the right partners of their respective lives, they get a ray of life and hope out of their listless and drab life.

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In her fictional depiction of women attempting to free themselves from repressive relationships, Sahgal is more direct in her feminist sympathies than the other writers. She makes a systematic and sustained effort to demolish deeply ingrained attitudes regarding women, before indicating ways in which a new image can be formulated. With an admirable steadfastness, she upholds her commitment to man-woman relationships based on mutual trust and communication between two equal individual. Man-woman relationship is the unit of individual and social life and hence it has been the central theme of the Novelists all over the world.

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The story is about obsession at one level, the obsession with freedom that made Indians commit their lives to violent or non-violent resistance to British rule at another level, Bhushan Singh's obsession with the search for his lost love, Razia. This is an obsessive besotted longing of the kind that mystics have for god, and more rarely, men and woman for each other.

The heart of the story is the meaning about the Indian Identity in this country, where cultures criss-crossed and blood streams have mingled, there is no such thing as racial purity or an exclusive identity traceable to a single source. In Bhushan Singh the Hindu and Muslim traditions combined as an inseparable joint inheritance. The novelist Nayanatara Sahgal deeply committed to modern India's secular tradition. It is an emotional and intellectual truth and Sahgal so keenly emphasized in her novel or novels.

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