

The Turmoil Of India In The Twilight Years Of British Empire – In Nayantara Sahgal’s Novel “Mistaken Identity”

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Abstract

Nayantara Sahgal is the author of nine Novels, ten works of non-fiction and wide-ranging literary and political commentary. She has received the Sahitya Akademi Award, the Sinclair Prize and the Commonwealth Writer's Prize.

The Novel “Mistaken Identity” is an elegant, adroitly constructed, mordantly written story of the playboy Bhushan Singh, son of the Raja of Vijaygarh. He is arrested and thrown into jail and charged with treason.

The Novelist successfully depicts the British officers' partial Judgements, tortures of Indian National Activists and the prison rules.

As news of violent world events penetrates the prison walls – civil war in Turkey, the rise of Mussolini, Gandhi's Dandi March, mass arrests, the death of hunger-strikers in Lahore – Bhushan discovers that fate has played a cruel trick on him.

The present paper is an attempt to bring out the story of a love and obsession that brilliantly summons up the turmoil of India in the twilight years of empire.

Key words: *Partial Judgements, tortures, mass arrests, hunger-strikers, penetrates, love and obsession.*

Introduction:

Nayantara Sahgal was born 10 May 1927 in Allahabad, India. She was educated in schools in Allahabad and Mussoorie, and at Wellesley College, USA (BA in History). Sahgal is a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and has held fellowships in the United States at the Radcliffe Institute, the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars and the National Humanities Center.

Nayantara Sahgal is the daughter of Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit, India's first ambassador to the UN, and the niece of Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first prime minister. Indira Gandhi was her first cousin. One can say that politics is in her blood. Her novels are often set against the backdrop of pivotal events in Indian history.

Sahgal served as India's Ambassador to Italy for a short while when Indira Gandhi was thrown out of power in the elections after the Emergency. Sahgal's unique upbringing informs her fiction and her political writing, beginning with her memoir *Prison and Chocolate Cake*. Her novels, which are often set against the backdrop of pivotal events in Indian history, include *A Time to Be Happy*; *Storm in Chandigarh*; *A Situation in New Delhi*. Her Novels *Rich Like Us* and *Mistaken Identity* are published in the U.S. by New Directions.

Mistaken Identity is as much about India's identity as it is about Bhushan Singh, the handsome son of a wealthy landlord loyal to the British Raj, who finds himself taken off a train in the middle of the night and dumped in jail with several Communists and Gandhi followers to be tried for treason. The year is 1929 when revolutionary ideas inspired by men as unlike as Lenin are spreading across India leading to industrial strife and political unrest. The British government uncovers or imagines conspiracies to overthrow the King and the book is based on a famous trial of the 1920's called the Meerut Conspiracy Case.

Discrimination of Indians:

The colonial set up and the discrimination of Indians has also been raised as a serious issue by the author. Comrade Dey, Bhushan's Prison mate complains that a European prisoner is treated very royally: he is given a ward which is almost equivalent to a bungalow with its lights, fans, table lamps and bathrooms. There was also discrimination in the food served. The whites who were served milk, butter, meat and toast to eat, but Indians got food which was unfit to eat. They used holes dug in the ground as toilets thereby creating a very unhygienic atmosphere inside the prison. The dress code was also different for whites and non-whites. The whites wore suits and tie whereas the Indian prisoners wore pyjamas with cut-off legs and shirts with cut-off sleeves.

The comrade Pillai believes that, days before the trial, the case is closed to make a special tribunal to enquire and assure that they are proved guilty by the tribunal. This was the strategy adopted for the Lahore conspiracy case.

Bhushan is one such victim. He never dreamt of throwing the King Emperor of power. The story actually begins when Bhushan returns from abroad to India in a ship and sets foot in the Bombay port. He stays in Hotel Taj, Mumbai and his Parsee friend Sylla comes to visit him in the Hotel. He presents her a book which she had asked him to bring from abroad. While he purchased a book for Sylla he also took a book for himself because of its attractive cover and a red binding. The title of the book was 'Revolt of Angels'. Sylla urges him to act in the play 'The Scarlet Letter' and stay in Mumbai for another week, though Bhushan has told the hotel authorities that he would stay only for a day, he extended his stay for a week. After taking part in the play, he leaves the place before the national anthem is sung as he thought it was getting late for him to reach home. All these factors are connected, and a case is fabricated against Bhushan, charging him with treason. In his own words the case is "I had been charged with conspiracy to deprive the king Emperor of his sovereignty over India." (MI 15)

As the months awaiting trial stretch into years, the apolitical Bhushan entertains cellmates with tales of his world: of his veiled mother; of his very modern Parsee girlfriend; of the American flapper who taught him the Turkey Trot; of his forbidden boyhood affair which ignited two murderous Hindu-Muslim riots and led to his banishment abroad. A complex work, *Mistaken Identity* is at once a family saga, a romance and a richly nuanced historical novel.

Set mainly in the prison cell in India, Bhushan takes the reader and his cell-mates back to the home of his youth, abroad to America, and on searches for his lost love through the tales he tells to pass the time waiting for the trial. In the background the struggle is on and there are hunger strikes, Gandhi's Salt Marches, mass arrests, and more. The reader gets a lot of general information about the country during that time and how ordinary citizens are treated, and the class difference that existed.

Protests and hunger strikes of the prisoners in support of Gandhi:

As the story progresses he slowly learns how similar he is to his cell-mates, regardless of social class and backward. It is interesting to read about him slowly becoming one of them and accepting their common humanity in the fight for justice rather than holding himself apart.

As the story continues these prisoners start revolting by the influence from other prisoners around the country and result of that is not that fruitful but the jailers turned against them. They go on hunger strike and also later protests along with words of patriotism in support of Gandhi. These protests led to the cut off in the newspaper supply to the prisoners as well as some other restrictions on moving out in playground etc.,

At last the trials come up, turn wise. Bhaiji and the twins are his companions in the prison. When Bhushan's turn arrives, he is questioned about his home, his beliefs on Hindu-Muslim relationship and also the riots. All this has taken the case in his opposite side.

Bhaiji had gone ill after his trial and he was seriously very ill and to such an extent that he was coughing without a break. It's difficult for him to breathe too. After next session of Bhushan, nothing was resolved much but just interrogation based on his past for which the commissioner from Vijaygarh is there. He is totally against him although being best friend of Bhushan's father as he never liked Bhushan.

That night Bhushan made Bhaiji sleep and then only left towards his own cot. But soon the coughing of Bhaiji was no more to be heard as he died. The cremation was done with proper way on request of the prisoners. The novel is in the time when all the important dates of Indian history took place and the author has taken special care to include all the details. Bhaiji's death is shown as a sacrifice for the sake of country as it happens just after Bhagath Singh's execution.

The Novel relates the tale of a minor Maharaja's son who is arrested for subversive activity, mistakenly, hence the title. The periods of his life as a wealthy wastrel, his family history, his

imprisonment and the tales of his fellow prisoners are the core of this well written novel. The narrative succeeds in conveying a chunk of Indian history and culture.

Human relationships:

It depicts myriad hues of various human relationships. Sahgal takes up the gender issues in Man-Woman relationship. It also brings out the social evils existing in the then society. It directly criticizes child marriage, female infanticide, polygamy and inequality of women.

In this Novel, the Ranee of Vijaygarh sets such an example which surprises the readers. The Raja made her a victim of polygamy and neglected her as a person. In order to free herself she took a bold decision and bade good bye to the false Ranee-hood by marrying comrade Yusuf. Thus we can say that Sahgal's women are not hostile to men, but they would certainly not settle for a subordinate position.

Bhushan the protagonist is a unique and unusual character who has got a different upbringing which instills feminine qualities in him. He has various remarkable relationships with women, which bring about a change in his views and perception. He is obsessed with his first lady love, Razia; he shares "a tender close companionship" with a Parsee girlfriend Sylla, another relationship with Wille-May, and in the end, he marries his cell-mate Yusuf's daughter about whom he feels: "I'd never been able to resist a woman's beauty or the culture of Islam."

The novel weaves a beautiful, realistic and convincing fabric of man-woman relationship in a subtle manner. The novelist highlighted the significance of a man's influence on a woman is subjected to various restrictions and tortures, while a man is free to do whatever he wishes to do.

Hindu-Muslim rivalry:

Among the post-independent Indian English novelists, Nayanatara Sahgal is one of the leading novelists with a developed sense of political awareness and who, in her novels, weaves successfully the different strands of India's social, political and cultural history into a viable narrative framework and close critical examination. Her novels not only explore the contemporary realities and trends in all their human details, but also examine them within the framework of a larger historical past of the country.

This novel is also an exploration of the Hindu-Muslim relations during the time of the Indian national movement. She knows that the Hindu-Muslim rivalry is a fault line of Indian democracy.

In this novel, she subjects Hindu-Muslim relations to constant questioning through her protagonist Bhushan Singh, the son of the Raja of Vijaygarh, a Taluk in the northern India. He is a fun loving dreamy person who goes to study in the US but comes back after one year without doing much study.

Sahgal, in the very introduction of the home town of her protagonist throws a hint about the simmering tension between Hindus and Muslims. She knows it very clearly that this tension has been there since the eleventh century when first Muslim invader came to India. Describing the location of his parents' country, Bhushan says:

“My parents' country was Vijaygarh, an ancient corner of the level oblong close to Ayodhya... This was holy land, flatland of the Ganges, Hinduism's heartland. The soil defiled and desecrated by Muslim invasions was where Rama once virtuously ruled.”

Conclusion:

Thus the story is about obsession: at one level, the obsession with freedom that more 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 women for each other.

The novel *Mistaken Identity* illustrates the fact as it lays emphasis more on man woman relationships inside and outside the ambit of marriage. It also depicts myriad hues of various human relationships. It elevates the importance of universal brotherhood with only one religion, that is, of humanity. The heart of the story is the meaning, for the narrator, of Indian identity. In this country where cultures have criss-crossed and bloodstreams 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 combine as an inseparable joint inheritance. The author is deeply committed to modern India's secular tradition.

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