



Emotional Dexterity in Nayantara Sahgal's Select Novels

S. Mathan, Ph.D Scholar, Department of English & Foreign Languages, Bharathiar University, Coimbatore.

 <https://orcid.org/0009-0007-9363-385X>

Dr. G. Vinoth Kumar, Assistant Professor, Department of English & Foreign Languages, Bharathiar University, Coimbatore.

Research Article

Abstract

Nayantara Sahgal has written several non-fictional works that include her two memoirs Prison and Chocolate Cake (1954) and From Fear Set Free (1963). Sahgal has been overwhelmed since childhood by the experience of the world recorded her valuable experiences in these memoirs. In her memoirs with greater interest, she portrayed the Father of our Nation Mahatma Gandhi, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru and other national leaders and freedom fighters of India. The other components of her memoirs were the hectic political activity in Anand Bhawan, her parental home in Allahabad and the Indian Freedom Movement. Nayantara Sahgal's non-fiction is a curious mixture and amalgamation of both autobiography and memoir. The Prison and Chocolate Cake and From Fear Set Free are two spellbinding and action-packed narrative sprinkled with the author's personal reminiscences of the lengthy struggle for India's independence, farsighted national heroes of India, colonization, decolonization and the consequences of it..

Keywords: Emotion, Dexterity, Nayantara Sahgal, Novels.

Nayantara Sahgal's *Prison and Chocolate Cake* was written in 1952. This popular work of Sahgal tells the first part of her life story. This work is a dramatic portrait of the spirit of sacrifice that carried British governed India through the years of the freedom struggle. This reminiscent memoir of an extraordinary and remarkable childhood concludes with the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi by Nathuram Gotse in New Delhi on 30th January 1948. The book is a flexible record of the writer's childhood. The book does not contain much political bragging of the Nehru dynasty as many of her fictional works are. Instead, it takes the readers to the era of pre-independence through the eyes of a charming little girl and narrates the experiences of her at a specific period in her life. *Prison and Chocolate Cake* proves that fact that reality is sometimes more appealing and enthralling than an imaginary tale.

In *Prison and Chocolate Cake* her narrative style is sometimes random, but mostly linear. Sahgal, in this work presents a recollection of the extraordinary teenage experiences of her in India, Mexico and the huge expanse of the United States of America. The author virtually steps outside her 'self' like an observer, to give a delightfully touching account of her mature parentage, evenhanded childhood, healthy relationships, forceful and dynamic influences and multi-cultural experiences of her younger days. The book also shows her artistic comfort and fondness for description, a balanced act of sensitivity and objectivity that makes alive the people and personalities and the locales she experienced in childhood. She presents a very beautiful des

Thus, all the three daughters breathed the spirit of freedom from their early childhood. In the introduction to the book, Sahgal has affirmed her purpose of writing this autobiographical book of hers: "*Prison and Chocolate Cake* was intended for myself and my family, and for the circle



of friends who had been part and parcel of the atmosphere it described” (PCC 18). Sahgal’s life-story is a recapitulation of the past dealing not only with the history of her ‘self’ but with that of the whole nation. It also describes certain political events of the period and hence it is good or rather must read for anyone who is interested to know the history of the nation as well as the political developments of the nation during the 20th century.

Sahgal’s first encounter with Gandhiji who is quite noteworthy. The whole event focuses Sahgal’s truthful, frank and honest nature. Sahgal recalls in *Prison and Chocolate Cake* her first meeting with Mahatma Gandhi at Anand Bhawan, Allahabad, at the age of four. She innocently blurted out, “But he’s ugly” (PCC 25) to which Gandhi responded by gleefully laughing, affectionately patting her cheek and hoping she would always remain as honest. This early autobiographical account conveys a clear sense of the contemporaneous growth of the writer’s generation with that of Indian nationalism. It was a battery, charged with Gandhi’s empirical amalgamated approach to politics, colonialism, religion, economy and social structures. As Sahgal recounts: “Our growing up was India’s growing up into political maturity - a different kind of political maturity from any that the world had seen before, based on an ideology inspired by self-sacrifice, compassion and peace” (PCC 20).

Sahgal also acknowledges Gandhi’s conviction to emancipate the downtrodden from the age-old psychological stigma. She understands his cleaning of latrines as “an act of infinite compassion that had the effect of dynamite on rock, setting the country’s social conscience ablaze against un touchability” (FFF 226). Gandhi’s adoption of a persona symbolizing austerity – his wearing just a loin cloth - berated by his critics as moral exhibitionism, was a visual connection with the deprived masses. Sahgal eulogizes his adopting this symbolic equalizer as “no single fact had done more to re-orient the thinking of an entire nation than Gandhi’s semi-nakedness” (FFF 40).

Sahgal reminisces her inspirational ‘third parent’, the pragmatic national icon, Jawaharlal Nehru. An image of the dauntless realistic hero coping with “the deluge of problems freedom had brought” (FFF 38) has been lastingly etched out by Sahgal in this book. Her description of a glimpse of the Prime Minister’s residence, on her return from America in 1947, helps gauge the limitless task in the aftermath of the partition that plagued the country’s freedom:

In the garden I could see a huddle of tents set up to shelter the refugees who straggled in. Lights were on in the small reception office downstairs. It was crowded with people...Upstairs in Mamu’s office the light would burn till late at night... In the morning the look of scant sleep would be on his face... contact with(masses), transcended fatigue and discouragement, kindled a lambent optimism. (FFF 28)

In the backdrop of the partition experience, Sahgal has depicted her fragile relationship with her husband Gautam Sahgal. Though she is very rational about marriage, she is not very conventional. Marriage meant a life-long alliance that gave an individual cent-percent space and freedom. At the outset, Sahgal confesses that she was well aware about the differences between the culture, customs and even ideologies of Gautam and those of hers.

In Gautam’s house there was a plenty of linen, glass and wine imported from Europe. On the other hand Sahgal’s parents and even grandparents abandoned all that was termed ‘foreign’. They were the pioneers of Swadeshi Movement in India. She remarkably refers to the notable difference in Gautam’s mental make-up and that of her own. She observes that “...this was an Indian [Gautam] to whom Gandhi was just a name and freedom for his country an event that had deprived him of his home [in Lahore] and a part of his inheritance” (FFF 21). She also discussed her confusion related to marriage with her Mamu Jawaharlal Nehru who advocated a



sense of freedom in every aspect of life. She too firmly believes that one should live with an individual with whom one is comfortable. Hence, Nehruji taught an urge for freedom inherent in the texture of her life to her. There is a political coloring even when she talks about her personal life when she mentions how their family habits and practices were influenced by the political conditions of the nation.

The entire text operates and advances through contrasting colonial and post-colonial scenarios including the fulfillment of independence and the bloody partition. The list of the keenly experienced dichotomous observations is unending and creates a fiction-like tension in the autobiography. For instance, the Sahgals, whose home in pre-partition Lahore had the best linen, glass and wine that “frequent visits to Europe could provide” and the Nehru-Pandits, who in support of the Swadeshi Movement made bonfires of foreign good and used only indigenous products. The author understands this dichotomy as an echoing resonance of the clash of the opposing currents of the past and present and its inevitable intervention in her life:

A part of me, deeply enmeshed in a political consciousness, strained every nerve in automatic response to what went on in India. This part was emotionally involved with India’s future, and belonged to my uncle’s home at this moment. The other part struggled to pull free and build a life as near normal as possible for myself. Long after I was married the tug of war continued. (FFF 47)

Being a privileged member in the Nehru household, she believes in complete inner freedom that was illumined by Gandhi. She always pined for not doing something creative. Hence, she pursued the path of creative writing. She firmly believed that Indian women did not need to unfurl feminist flag. “Indian women did not have to march in suffragette processions to proclaim their equality with men, or don bloomers in place of their feminine garb. No such measures were necessary. Gandhi’s call to women to take part in the national movement beside their men brought them forward as natural as if they had been born to such a life” (FFF 67).

Sahgal’s autobiographical account is truthful, confessional, picturesque and contemporaneous dealing with the greatest freedom struggle of India. This life-story is not only a life-story of Sahgal herself but also a saga of Nehru’s family, RanjitSitaram’s family and above all India, the motherland with her “Unity in Diversity”. Sahgal’s habit of story telling obviously suggests that she is a novelist. Nevertheless, her habit of story-telling and the use of anecdotes have definitely enriched the organization of experiences in her life story. Sahgal’s memoirs express her inner life as a reflection of outward movement of India’s freedom struggle. Her autobiographical works truly express the tone and temper of her Era. Hence, one feels that they are the true records of 20th century India. Her works have reflected India with all her cultural diversity.

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