

RITU MENON'S *OUT OF LINE*: A STUDY OF NAYANTARA SAHGAL'S DYSFUNCTIONAL MARRIAGE AND DISILLUSIONED POLITICS

Dr. (Mrs.) N. Velmani

Associate Professor of English
Dean of Arts

V.V. Vanniaperumal College for Women,
Virudhunagar, Tamil Nadu 626001

Abstract

The major preoccupation of modern Indian writers has been a delineation of marital life, subtle interpersonal relationships and women's role at home and in a culture where individualism and protest have often remained alien. Recently the Indian writers with western education and native culture exhibit their talent in the autobiographies, biographies and memories dealing with impressionistic memories of places, people 'rediscovery' or 'reconnection' of relationships Ritu Menon's *Out of Line : A Personal and Political Biography of Nayantara Sahgal (2014)* highlights the first hand information in the private and public life of Sahgal – the tumultuous political background and the emotional concerns which are a rich source for any biographer.

Introduction

Post – colonial Indian fiction depicts the very complexity and the mindset of the novelists in the Indian milieu with respect to the structured social framework and the contemporary political ambience. The most celebrated Indian women novelists engender a unique flavour in their novels by substantiating their competencies on sensational issues, throwing overboard and subverting the precincts of a conservative society, imbibing a sharp sense of spontaneity, inherent sensibility and nativity of the experiences of the past. The major preoccupation of their writings has been a delineation of marital life, subtle interpersonal relationships and women' role at home and in a culture where individualsin and protest have often remained alien. In the words of Simone de Beauvoir,

one is not born, but rather becomes woman. No biological, psychological or economic fate determines the figure that the female presents in a society, it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature which is described as feminine. (*The second sex 64*)

The Indian writers with western education and native culture exhibit palpably Indo – Nostalgic writing - may be autobiographies, biographies, memories, quasi – fictionalized memories - inspired in part by the writer's imaginations. They are not about 'heavy' topics such as cultural identity, conflicted identities, multilingualism or rootlessness. The writings are often

less self-conscious and more light-hearted, perhaps dealing with impressionistic memories of places, people – ‘rediscovery’ or ‘reconnection’ of relationships.

Biographies and Autobiographies

Biographical works are usually non-fiction but fiction can also be used to portray a person’s life. An authorized biography is written with the permission, cooperation, discussion and at times participation of a subject or a subject’s heirs. Biography is a key to history, personal opinions about their subjects coverings interesting or significant part of subject’s life with intimate details of experience and an analysis of the subject’s personality.

Autobiography, a favourite literary form, makes the writer an authority on himself. The success of the autobiographies of Gandhi (*The Story of My Experiments with Truth*), Nehru (*Towards Freedom*), Nirad Chaudhuri (*Thy Hand, Great Anarch*) and Abdul Kalam (*The Wings of Fire*) have tempted many others to spread themselves on the private page. *My Dateless Diary* by R.K.Narayan achieved a vogue of its own. Justice M.C.Chugla’s *Roses in December* (1973) is a fascinating self – portrait of a scholar, educationist, Jurist and statesman. Kamala Das’s *My Story* exposes its uninhibited revelation of her feelings and experience in a sensational way. Minoos Masani’s *Bliss was it in that Dawn* (1977) recalls some of his experience of the Gandhian Heroic Age. Kasthuri Sreenivasan’s *Climbing the Coconut Tree* (1980) is a partial record recalling his childhood and boyhood years in a village near Coimbatore bringing out the loyalty to one’s family, caste, pride in his homestead and the general ethos of village life.

Raja Rao’s *A Life of Mahatma Gandhi*

According to the concept of French theorists, Taine and Sainte Beuve, a writer is critically evaluated in terms of race, milieu and moment. The magnificent obsession with transparency in both public and private lives of the writer is precisely the stuff of the biography. The writer Raja Rao’s concern in writing the biography *A Life of Mahatma Gandhi* was motivated by Gandhiji’s autobiography that created the climate of India’s freedom and idealized Satyagraha to usher in not merely a political but a metaphysical change. Raja Rao’s own reason for writing yet another life of Gandhiji is because

Most of the biographies (whether American or French, Greek or English) are true generally to facts but not so to meaning. There are however a biography by Indians the official and monumental one is an extravagant dictionary of dates and facts, and the more able and personal ones exhausting demonstration of the amalgam of human existence. *A Biography of Gandhi* it seemed to me had to be written as it were from the inside, desparately, faithfully. It is an ambitious task. Should one dare it –I have. (Preface viii)

It is a biography with a difference- not a mere chronicle of facts but the essence of facts summing up the quintessence of Gandhiji’s life.

Ritu Menon’s Biography of Sahgal

Following this trend Ritu Menon, the author and editor of several books, among them the ground breaking *Borders and Boundaries: Women in India’s Partition* and *Making a Difference: Memories from the Women’s Movement in India*, has recently authored *Out of Line: A Personal and Political Biography of Nayantara Sahgal* (2014). This work is based on first-hand information, lengthy interviews, private papers, thousands of letters and archival documents. Though *Prison and Chocolate Cake* (1954) is a landmark autobiography by *Nayantara Sahgal*, the first woman political columnist in the country, Ritu Menon looks at Sahgal’s family ties, her

troubled first marriage, her sharp criticism about Indira Gandhi, her politics and her writing not as a detached observer but as an affectionate admirer of Sahgal, a unique personality born into the first family of Indian politics. Her biography of Sahgal presents a portrait of a remarkable woman who let neither family loyalty nor a bad marriage silence her.

Out of Line is about literary, personal and political life of Sahgal, the three strands interwoven together and interdependent on each other. One of the possibilities that biography offers is to illuminate the subject's life, not in a scurrilous way, not in a sensational way but simply to get a temper of the times by going through the singular aspect of a single person's life. In the preface to her work, she explains her endeavour by writing that she

contends with two potentially overwhelming facts: that the subject is member of one of the country's most high-profile political families, almost relentlessly in the public eye and the public domain; and that she herself has recorded or written about practically everything of significance in her life. What then remains for the biographer?.

(Preface iv)

Ritu Menon answers this basic question by retracing Sahgal's steps in a relatively complicated life journey, aided throughout by the author's recollections, notes, lengthy conversations together with all kinds of personal details, moods, attitudes and opinions.

Autobiography of Sahgal

Ritu Menon clearly states that it is not her job to write a hagiographic account by sitting in judgement on her subject, rather, by presenting the full picture, she allows the reader to come to their conclusion. Normally the biography begins with the details of the childhood moving to adulthood and achievement Menon does not repeat Sahgal's childhood as Sahgal had already written her *Prison and Chocolate Cake*, a landmark autobiography with details of her royal heritage. She was the second of the three daughters (Chandralekha Mehta, Nayantara Sahgal and Rita Dar) born to Jawaharlal Nehru's sister, Vijayalakshmi Pandit (the first Indian ambassador to the United States) and her father Ranjit Sitaram Pandit, (a successful barrister from Kathiawad and classical scholar who translated Kalhana's epic history *Rajatarangini* into English from Sanskrit). She was born on 10 May, 1927 in Allahabad, graduated from Woodstock school in the Himalayan hill station of Landour in 1943 and later from Wellesley College in Massachusetts, USA (BA, 1947). Sahgal or Tara (Taru), born in a grand political lineage, lives and works in an elite environment, experiencing the aristocratic privileged life – the aristocratic life in the midst of global icons like singer Paul Robeson, activist Margaret Sanger, journalist John Gunter, the author Pearl S. Buck and her husband, Russian writer Vladimir Nabokov, the artists Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo. She gives a glimpse of her political background and in the centre of the freedom movement patriotism comes naturally following the footsteps of her father who died in Lucknow prison jail in 1944 and her uncle who often experienced prison life. Though Sahgal, her sisters and her parents were teased for wearing Khadi caps in their evening walk, Sahgal is not affected. She continues to wear the cap saying, "If Mamu can go to jail because of it, I can keep mine on my head!" (*Prison and Chocolate Cake* 46).

Sahgal's adulthood

Menon did not go through Sahgal's childhood, not giving vulgar succession of details. Rather she focusses on two things – dysfunctional marriage in a woman writer's life and disillusioned family loyalty to her cousin Mrs. Indira Gandhi. Marriage is an idealised sacred

institution but it is not for women, it is for men. It is a critical event in every woman's life. Menon applauds Sahgal's concerted attempts to keep it going, not to allow it to fall apart. Much of *Out of Line* is about Sahgal's heated, meandering love life and relationships indeed, the title is chosen to reflect this theme. When she was just 17, the 40 – year – old – sculptor Isamu Noguchi fell hard for her and proposed again and again and ended in failure by dedicating his seminal masterwork Kouros. Sahgal herself writes about her younger days "I became very sex – sought – after" (78). There was a succession of lovers – Shankar Bajpai, a fellow – student in the USA with sincerest attachment and Nicholas Wyruboff, an exiled Russian aristocrat in France to whom Sahgal was enormously attracted. But with family approval she married the conventional Punjabi – Gautam Sahgal. This rocky, then wrecked marriage, led to a wretched violence. With their three children in Bombay, Sahgal found it hard to cope with Gautam's possessiveness and jealousy. The marriage began to flounder and eventually collapsed unable to take the strain of Nayantara's overwhelming attraction to ICS officer E.N.Mangat Rai. Menon portrays this happy love with the fidelity to the subject's viewpoint how this romance with the exchange of 6000 letters to each other over a three year period ended in marriage in 1979, 12 years after her divorce from Gautam Sahgal in 1967. Through this personal turbulence; the literary output of Sahgal established her as one of the most energetic living legends of the freedom struggle.

Politics is all pervasive in all her novels reflecting the reality of the contemporary political scene with the fusion of rich heritage and a strong western impact. Dr.Manmohan Bhatnagar comments

Nayantara Sahgal's novels present obviously a chronical account of Indian politics from the last phase of the freedom struggle to the breakdown of democracy in mid-seventies. She herself explains that politics is embedded in her bones and marrow and in her emotional and intellectual make up to such an extent that she can no longer remain a mere passive spectator to the happenings with a far reaching fall affecting human interests.... She goes about setting her stories in a historical recognizable locale. The milieu invoked in all its diverse dimensions is neither mere window dressing nor the dull, drab and soulless account of a historian. (56-57)

Having spent most of her early years at Anand Bhawan, her ideas and images are shaped by the political events that took place almost in front of her.

Sahgal's Relations with Mrs.Gandhi

As a member of the Nehru – Gandhi extended family, Sahgal wrote *Indira Gandhi's Emergence and Style*(1978), *Indira Gandhi: Her Road to Power*(1982), *Indira Gandhi – Tryst with Power*(1984) which gave an in-depth study of Indira Gandhi's style of functioning and political leadership which marked a drastic break with the democratic tradition of her family and Indian politics. Sahgal was brave to write against Mrs.Gandhi's authoritarianism. Family loyalty would have held others back when Sahgal felt Mrs.Gandhi was departing from that ideal, it was necessary to bring it to her notice. When Nehru had an influence on her with his firm commitment to the socialist ideal for India, Sahgal was irritated by Gandhi's choice of her sons as her succession a huge set back to healthy democratic development.

Like her mother Vijayalakshmi Pandit who had been estranged from active politics, Sahgal placed the cause for estrangement on her cousin Indira who equally resented her aunt and

was hostile to her cousin. When her marriage was falling apart, Sahgal wrote in a letter to Raj in 1967.

The deadness and coldness of the woman and her extreme removal from even the barest humanness chilled me to the marrow. She was washing her hair when I arrived (9.45 p.m) and came out with a towel wrapped around her head, sat down and said, “you?” in the tone of someone conducting an extra interview that was in the schedule.

The emotional feel and flow in Sahgal’s writing comes to light via Ritu Menon how history, made by the popular charismatic leader Nehru and his legacy, had its painful and steady decline in politics through his daughter.

Conclusion

Out of Line, quite frankly, surveys the remarkable interior and private life of Sahgal and occasionally almost unbelievable life. Very much like her beloved maternal uncle, Jawaharlal Nehru, the statesman and liberal progressive minded ruler who *civilized the savaging world*, Sahgal has experienced one of the most public and widely- written-about lives in Indian contemporary history. In the wake of brutal violent atmosphere of her married life ‘falling apart’, she wrote political columns as a journalist for fourteen years, inspite of repeated warning to ‘fall in line’, she was up against the Establishment, the power politics as a political writer. She expressed her concern about the erosion of democratic principles and the suppression of all dissent. She has admitted her preference for focalising politics through the experience of living ‘as a woman’ in interaction with the private and political dimensions of varied systems of power. Though Sahgal is a political liability earning the extreme displeasure of India’s most powerful woman and her personal failure in marriage is considered a social embarrassment, Ritu Menon has portrayed Sahgal as one of the most perceptive writers in the evolution of Indian democracy and politics.

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