

## **THE EVOLVING CANVAS: INDIA IN NAYANTARA SAHGAL'S FICTION**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This research paper explores the multifaceted portrayal of India in the fiction of Nayantara Sahgal, a prominent postcolonial Indian English novelist. Sahgal's narratives meticulously depict various dimensions of postcolonial Indian society, encompassing religious, moral, political, social (specifically man-woman relationships), and historical aspects. The study delves into the profound influence of Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru on Sahgal's creative ethos, examining how Gandhian principles of non-violence, decentralization, and spiritual humanism, alongside Nehruvian ideals of cultural pluralism and hybridity, shape her literary vision. Furthermore, the paper analyzes Sahgal's critique of patriarchal norms and sexual colonialism, advocating for gender equality and emotional reciprocity in relationships. It also investigates her nuanced perspective on Hinduism, distinguishing between its rich heritage and fundamentalist distortions, and her engagement with Indian political history, emphasizing ethical leadership and the interconnectedness of national and global events. Ultimately, Sahgal's works present India not merely as a geographical entity but as a dynamic idea rooted in pluralism, secularism, and a continuous quest for humanistic values.

**Keywords:** Nayantara Sahgal, Indian English Fiction, Postcolonial Literature, Images of India, Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, Gender Relations, Hinduism, Indian Politics, History.

Nayantara Sahgal stands as a pivotal figure in postcolonial Indian English literature, celebrated for her perceptive and nuanced depictions of the Indian experience. Her fictional works serve as a rich tapestry, illustrating the complex interplay of cultural, social, and political forces shaping post-independence India. This paper undertakes an in-depth examination of Sahgal's multifaceted "images of India" as conveyed through her novels. These images are not static; rather, they evolve, reflecting the religious fervor, moral dilemmas, political machinations, intricate man-woman relationships, and pivotal historical moments that define the nation's journey. To understand the depth of Sahgal's vision, it is imperative to first appreciate the literary and personal foundations upon which her creative output rests.

The genesis of the Indian English novel is a fascinating narrative of cultural convergence and literary innovation. Emerging from the colonial encounter, this literary form became a powerful medium for Indian voices to articulate their experiences, aspirations, and critiques. Within this evolving landscape, Nayantara Sahgal carved a distinctive niche. Her biographical trajectory and personal experiences are inextricably linked to the fabric of her fiction. Born into a family deeply intertwined with India's freedom struggle and its

subsequent political leadership, Sahgal's formative years were steeped in an environment of intellectual discourse and national awakening. Two figures, in particular, exerted an indelible influence on her creative sensibility.

Sahgal's profound connection to Mahatma Gandhi transcends mere intellectual admiration; it is rooted in a deeply personal assimilation of his principles. She articulates how Gandhi's "spark" touched her as a child, gradually permeating her consciousness to become an intrinsic part of her being. This deep impact is evident in her consistent espousal of Gandhian values throughout her literary corpus. Sahgal's novels consistently underscore the importance of decentralization of power, self-sacrifice, compassion, peace, non-violence, and individualism. These tenets are not abstract ideals in her work; they form the ethical backbone against which her characters navigate personal and political challenges. As Ashish Nandy insightfully argues in *The Intimate Enemy* (1983), Gandhi's philosophy can be seen as a "transcultural protest against the hyper-masculine world view of colonialism." Sahgal, mirroring this perspective, uses Gandhi's ideals as a potent force to resist the lingering vestiges of colonial thought, advocating for a liberation that extends beyond mere political freedom to encompass a profound psycho-spiritual transformation. Her fiction, therefore, becomes a literary extension of Gandhi's lifelong endeavor to foster a truly free and civilized India, striving to transform the "political animal to a political human."

Equally influential, if in a different vein, was Sahgal's maternal uncle, Jawaharlal Nehru. Nehru, as the quintessential embodiment of the postcolonial Indian ethos, symbolized a nation grappling with both the effervescent optimism of independence and the inherent complexities of its hybrid cultural identity. Sahgal's early life was marked by an almost filial devotion to Nehru's intellect and vision; she meticulously followed his speeches and devoured his writings. Nehru's embrace of cultural plurality and his candid acknowledgment of the "spiritual bewilderment" arising from India's multicultural experience resonated deeply with Sahgal. Growing up amidst this rich tapestry of diverse influences, Sahgal seamlessly translated this atmosphere of hybridity into a celebratory theme within her fiction, embracing the notion that India's strength lies in its diverse cultural threads rather than in any singular, monolithic identity.

The second significant aspect of India explored in Sahgal's fiction is the intricate and often fraught realm of man-woman relationships, particularly within the institution of marriage, in postcolonial Indian society. For Sahgal, like many postcolonial writers, the act of writing itself is a form of resistance. She emerges as a fierce rebel against established, often meaningless, societal norms, particularly those that perpetuate gender inequality. Her fiction serves as a powerful platform to deconstruct and re-examine the pervasive stereotypes that relegate women to a subordinate status, portraying them as less than human. Sahgal challenges the notion of a "fable of flesh" that denies women their agency, their inherent desires, and their capacity for error, presenting them instead as full human beings with complex inner lives.

Sahgal's narratives relentlessly interrogate male hegemony. Her works are infused with a profound humanistic vision, reflecting a genuine concern for human values and the predicament of women in a deeply patriarchal society. The struggle depicted in her fiction is

not merely for individual liberation but for the broader abolition of gender discrimination, striving for reciprocity, mutuality, and harmony in relationships. While asserting women's strength and value, Sahgal is careful not to advocate for a separatist "female world." Instead, she envisions an integrated whole, where feminine virtues, morality, and values blend synergistically with masculine culture, believing such a synthesis is vital to avert societal "catastrophe and doom."

A critical lens through which Sahgal examines gender dynamics is sexual colonialism. This concept highlights the intricate link between sex and power, where the male sex colonizes and exploits the female, resulting in a subtle yet pervasive form of "interior colonization." Sahgal argues that men, in this system, act as colonizers, and women, the colonized, occupying a position analogous to that of racial minorities, despite constituting half of the human population. She vehemently protests against the societal conditioning that forces women into unquestioning acceptance of roles defined by inferiority, passivity, submissiveness, and dependence. Sahgal voices her strong dissatisfaction with a patriarchal society that perpetuates these stereotypes, trapping women within the confines of wifehood and motherhood, thereby denying them the freedom for self-actualization. The institution of marriage itself often "nauseates" Sahgal, not inherently, but because it frequently legitimizes violence against women and grants men legal control over their bodies. Notably, Sahgal emphasizes the devastating impact of emotional violence over physical violence, recognizing its profound and lasting influence on a sensitive woman's entire life. Consequently, she champions a new marital morality founded on mutual trust, consideration, generosity, and the absence of pretense, selfishness, and self-centeredness. For Sahgal, sex is an integral part of life, not a disconnected entity, and she critiques the prevalent imbalance where female love is solely about self-giving, while male love is perceived as the fulfillment of all needs, sexual and emotional.

The third significant facet of India explored in Sahgal's fiction is her nuanced image of Hinduism, which she views as inextricably linked to the broader concept of India itself. Sahgal posits that religion and religious attitudes profoundly influence both individual predicaments and the collective political destiny of a people. While she takes immense pride in her Hindu heritage, recognizing its deep roots in Indian culture and tradition, she is a vocal critic of Hindutva, which she identifies as a fundamentalist offshoot of Hinduism. Sahgal observes with alarm how communalism, a "fathomless canker," has eroded the very foundations of Indian society, with age-old morality and customs being exploited in the name of religion to manipulate the vulnerable.

She vehemently opposes the passive acceptance of ritualistic religions that breed communal disharmony. For Sahgal, religion, when reduced to mere ritual, ultimately destroys societal harmony. This conviction leads her to interpret religion through the lens of universal humanism. As a liberal and free thinker, she rejects narrow, dogmatic interpretations of faith. Tradition, for Sahgal, is not a static relic but a dynamic concept that must evolve with time.

Sahgal holds a firm belief that religion and politics make for a volatile and detrimental mix. She argues that politics invariably brings out the worst in religion, a pattern observed globally, and one that India, if it succumbs, will not escape. A religion driven by the lust for

power, she contends, is not true religion. While acknowledging the presence of superstition and ignorance that have sometimes "blurred the visionary quest of Indian sages" within Hinduism, she also recognizes its inseparable integration into the Indian psyche. For Sahgal, "the story of Hinduism is the story of India." Her emphasis is not on outright rejection or unquestioning acceptance, but on a positive interpretation of Hinduism as a living, evolving document, one that rejects the selfish motives of fanatics who reduce it to a mere ritualistic pattern. Her quest for change centers on defining religion as a human faith rather than a "pompous show of certain religious values" that hold no meaning in the contemporary postcolonial world. Sahgal champions liberal Hinduism, asserting that those who exploit religion for personal gain ultimately become symbols of evil, embodying a "prickly mixture of arrogance and inhumanity." She highlights the prevalence of ritualism in Indian society but strongly advocates for the principle that religion is a private and sacred concern of individuals, not of governments, and that India's identity is founded on the nourishment of all religions within its soil.

The fourth core aspect examined in Sahgal's fiction is her perception of politics in India. Her works are firmly grounded in realism, reflecting not only her personal values but also the shifting societal values exposed to both newfound freedom and the inherent temptations of power. A central tenet of her political philosophy, deeply rooted in Gandhian principles, is the indispensable need for morality in public life. The Indian freedom movement served as a profound catalyst for her creative imagination, and her novels consistently illustrate her unwavering quest for socio-political change.

Sahgal's narratives intricately weave through the political milieu of contemporary India, alongside its cultural, social, and economic landscapes. However, she transcends mere descriptive accounts of political situations or the lives of politicians. Instead, she delves deeply into the multifaceted repercussions of political events, exploring their impact on both a realistic and imaginative level. Her analytical gaze extends to scrutinize the effects of these events on the characters embroiled within them, revealing the personal human cost and consequence of political actions. Sahgal's fiction, therefore, becomes a critical commentary on the evolving political landscape of India, consistently emphasizing the ethical dimension of power and governance.

Sahgal further explores distinctive sense of history from a postcolonial vantage point. She possesses a unique connection to history, both "umbilical" and academic. Her familial ties as Jawaharlal Nehru's niece, coupled with her birth in the 1920s, witnessing the unfolding of modern Indian history firsthand, lend her a singular perspective as a writer. Furthermore, her graduation in history from Wellesley College in America honed her intellectual capabilities and imaginative sensibilities, providing her with a sharp historical insight. Consequently, an obsessive historical framework underpins her fiction. This deliberate recall of the past serves to illuminate and contextualize the present, representing her conscious effort to deploy history in addressing the contemporary human predicament.

Sahgal's unique historical sense is underscored by strong ethical undercurrents. She consistently reminds politicians of their fundamental humanity, highlighting the compassionate lives of those who embody these values. She observes how, with the firm

establishment of colonialism, Indian history was relegated to a subsidiary branch of European history, a narrative she implicitly challenges. Through most of her works, Sahgal masterfully captures the reverberations of significant global events as they intersect with the unfolding Indian political spectacle, emphasizing the interconnectivity of national histories.

For Sahgal, history is not a linear progression dictated by a select few but a product of the collective actions of the entire human race. A regional history, in her view, gains its true significance only when situated within the broader context of world history. She firmly believes that understanding the past of any object, practice, individual, or nation is crucial for clarity, perspective, and for advancing the enlightening achievements of human civilization. The Indian freedom movement, by initiating the process of decolonization, stirred the Indian consciousness, allowing for a clearer vision once the veneer of "charitable and civilizing missions" from colonial cultural politics was stripped away. This awakening spurred a critical re-reading and re-writing of history, prompting Sahgal to question the representations of Indian culture and history found in European narratives.

Sahgal is vehemently against the instrumentalization of history to serve specific ideological motives. She asserts that the primary purpose of history is the betterment of humanity. Through her fiction, she strives to make Indians aware of the "fictionalized conception of their identity" imposed by colonial narratives. She challenges the Eurocentric worldview that mythologizes Europe as the world's center, inhabited by a superior race, and possessing a monopoly on civilization—a claim that conveniently justified European conquest and exploitation of "non-Europe." In this colonial construct, "non-Europe" was a "mixed bag of 'lesser breeds'," a phrase immortalized by Kipling, supposedly in dire need of European enlightenment. Sahgal powerfully counters this narrative by asserting that non-Europe possesses valuable contributions: alternative perspectives, different ways of perceiving the world, and unique approaches to politics, love, marriage, medicine, philosophy, and nutrition. She believes these alternative approaches can lead to beneficial shifts in perspective, ultimately finding their rightful place in the global mainstream, which has historically been undilutedly Western.

An extensive study of Nayantara Sahgal's fiction reveals a comprehensive and deeply resonant image of India. For Sahgal, India transcends the confines of a mere geographical entity; it is, at its core, an idea. This idea is intrinsically linked to pluralism, a value Sahgal cherishes in every facet of life. She champions the importance of dissenting views, recognizing that such perspectives enrich and clarify our understanding of any given idea, making our perception more authentic. Sahgal is a staunch advocate for the secularist political values that underpinned the freedom movement. She consistently affirms the virtues of cultural pluralism, religious tolerance, and non-violence, presenting them not as abstract ideals but as historically embedded within the Indian nation's identity. This unwavering stance has empowered her to openly criticize significant political and cultural developments, including Indira Gandhi's Emergency Rule and the rise of Hindutva fundamentalist practices. She resists any interpretation of Indian culture filtered through the colonial lens of the Raj. Her enduring belief lies in the necessity of a reconciliation of cultures, recognizing that the

contemporary postcolonial world demands not singular solutions, but a multiplicity of approaches and understandings for true progress and harmony.

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