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NAYANTARA SAHGAL (1927 -)

Nayantara Sahgal is a novelist and political commentator. Her father Ranjit Sitaram Pandit was a barrister and Sanskrit scholar and her mother Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit, who was Jawaharlal Nehru's younger sister, became a diplomat and politician after her husband's death in 1944. Sahgal spent her childhood at the Nehru family home Anand Bhawan in Allahabad. While her parents were imprisoned due to nationalist political activities in 1943, Nayantara and her older sister Chandralekha Pandit moved to the US, where she studied the next four years at Wellesley College, Massachusetts, and graduated with a BA degree in history. Nayantara Pandit returned to independent India in 1947 and lived with her "third parent", Jawaharlal Nehru, in Delhi. In 1949, she married Gautam Sahgal, with whom she had three children. The marriage ended in divorce in 1967, after which Sahgal became a professional writer. By that time she had already written two memoirs about her childhood and young adulthood in the Nehru family amid the Independence struggle, *Prison and Chocolate Cake* (1954) and *From Fear Set Free* (1962), as well as two novels.

Sahgal wrote political columns for newspapers and became increasingly critical of her cousin, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, following bank nationalisation and the split of the Congress party in 1969. During the Emergency (1975-77), a period of authoritarian rule by Prime Minister Gandhi, Sahgal, whose political commentary had been stopped, worked in the US and wrote a book that is highly critical of Indira Gandhi and her leadership and spans Indira Gandhi's first premiership from the early days until the aftermath of the Emergency. *Indira Gandhi's Emergence and Style* was published in New Delhi in 1978 and in a slightly different form as *Indira Gandhi: Her Road to Power* in New York in 1982. The latter version covers also Indira Gandhi's return to power. A third edition of the book, *Indira Gandhi: A Tryst with Power*, with a new post-script came out in 2012. Sahgal's critical newspaper writings and

speeches on Indira Gandhi from the Emergency period are collected in *A Voice for Freedom* (1977).

Sahgal married the civil servant E.N. Mangat Rai (1915-2003) in 1979. Together they published a volume entitled *Relationship: Extracts from a Correspondence* (1994). Sahgal served as a member of the Indian delegation to the United Nations General Assembly in 1978 and the following year she worked as lecturer at the University of Colorado. In the early 1980s, she was a fellow at the Woodrow Wilson International Center in Washington, D.C. and at the National Humanities Center in North Carolina. She was elected Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 1990. In 1997 she was awarded an Honorary Doctorate for Literature by the University of Leeds. Honouring her brave confrontation of authority while defending democracy in India, Sahgal was given the Alumna Achievement Award by Wellesley College in 2002.

Sahgal received the Commonwealth Writers Prize (Eurasian region) for *Plans for Departure* (1985), and the Sinclair Prize and the Sahitya Akademi Award for English for her novel *Rich Like Us* in 1986, but returned the latter in 2015 in protest against increasing intolerance towards right to dissent in India. She was elected as a Vice President of PEN International in 2018. She lives in Dehradun.

While Sahgal has been critical of her cousin Indira Gandhi, she has expressed her admiration and respect for her uncle Jawaharlal Nehru in many of her works and presented a “political-personal” view of Nehru’s major concerns and policies in *Jawaharlal Nehru: Civilizing a Savage World* (2010). She is also the editor of *Before Freedom: Nehru’s Letters to his Sister* (2000) and the collection *Nehru’s India: Essays on the Maker of a Nation* (2015). Her other works of non-fiction include *The Freedom Movement in India* (1970), *The Story of India’s*

Freedom Movement (2013), *Point of View: A Personal Response to Life, Literature and Politics* (1997) and *The Political Imagination* (2014).

Sahgal's novels are infused with "a sense of history", as she herself has put it. The lives of her characters are entangled with Indian political and social history. Alongside politics, gender and woman's roles in the family and marriage have been central themes in her fiction. Her first two novels, *A Time to Be Happy* (1958) and *This Time of Morning* (1965), both mix politics, the first of the pre-independence period of 1932 to 1948 and the second of the post-independence era, with the breakdown of the main characters' marriages.

In Sahgal's third novel, *Storm in Chandigarh* (1969), civil servant Vishal Dubey, accepts a posting to Chandigarh, the capital of both Punjab and Haryana since Punjab was divided in 1966 on linguistic grounds, where he tries to alleviate tensions between the two states' chief ministers. Referencing and reminiscing Partition, the novel concentrates on the political conflict brewing in the state capital, as well as on two troubled middle-class marriages. *The Day in Shadow* (1971) puts the personal above the political, even though both these elements are there. The protagonist Simrit is a writer, who is in the process of divorcing her husband Som on both personal and political reasons. Simrit forms a relationship with Raj, an idealistic member of parliament, with whom she has similar values, whereas Simrit differs with Som in her views on Indian politics of the late 1960s.

A Situation in New Delhi (1977) again puts politics on centre stage as it examines the Indian political scene in the 1960s after the death of the charismatic leader Shivraj, who is clearly modelled after Nehru. The problem of power, the future of the young democracy and Nehru's legacy are at the core of this narrative, which revolves around a circle of Shivraj's relatives and associates. It also discusses youth, revolution and violence in a narrative strand that is centred on the University of Delhi. *Rich Like Us* (1985), possibly Sahgal's best-known novel, is set in

the time of the Emergency. The central character, Sonali, a civil servant with a conscience, resigns after failing to prove her “committedness” to Indira Gandhi’s corrupt administration. The novel explores the Emergency excesses, such as forced family planning, as well as nepotism, Sanjay Gandhi’s “people’s car” and political corruption. *Rich Like Us* also follows the life story of Rose, an outspoken Cockney expatriate, who has come to India decades earlier as the second wife of an Indian businessman.

The novels *Plans for Departure* (1985), *Mistaken Identity* (1988) and *Lesser Breeds* (2003) are set in colonial India. *Plans for Departure* is set on a hill station in the Himalayas, where a young feminist Danish woman, Anna Hansen, arrives to work as an assistant to an Indian scientist in 1914, at the outbreak of WWI. The novel focuses on the troubled marriages of a British missionary and his wife and the District Magistrate Henry Brewster whose wife has recently left him, and on the colonial relation of Britain and India. Anna Hansen’s romantic interest in Brewster, who has become disillusioned with British rule in India, is shaken by a mysterious death. In *Mistaken Identity*, the protagonist Bhushan Singh, used to a privileged existence as the son of the Raja of Vijaygarh, is arrested on a mistaken charge and jailed together with Congress party workers and communists in 1929. Singh is charged with treason and spends three years in jail, where he tells the story of his life and becomes familiar with the work of the activists. *Lesser Breeds*, which takes its name from Kipling’s poem, begins with a section covering the period from 1932 to 1942. A young teacher, Nurullah, becomes involved in the Indian non-violent struggle for independence through Nikhil, who asks Nurullah to tutor his young daughter Shan. In the second section, the focus is on Shan, who attends university in the United States during the Second World War. In the last part, set in 1966, Nurullah reflects on the past and present politics.

Sahgal followed her short-story collection *Day of Reckoning* (2015) with a dystopian satire and a critique of Hindu nationalism, *When the Moon Shines by Day* (2017), set in a non-democratic India of religious segregation, discrimination and torture. The short novel *The Fate of Butterflies* (2019) continues this exploration of an India where sectarian, gendered and caste-based violence is commonplace.

Further Reading

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