

THE POWER OF DOGMAS, GENDER, CLASS AND CASTE IN NAYANTARA**SAHAGAL'S MISTAKEN IDENTITY**

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Abstract

Nayantara Sahgal's *Mistaken Identity* (1988) is a politically and psychologically complex novel that examines the impact of dogma, gender, class, and caste on personal and national identity. Set during the Indian freedom movement, the novel follows Bhushan (Jumbo), a reluctant poet from an aristocratic background, who is mistakenly imprisoned as a political conspirator. His arrest triggers introspection into a past marked by suppressed desires, especially his love for Razia, a Muslim woman, and a deep-seated identity crisis. Sahgal uses symbolic references like *The Scarlet Letter* and themes of Hindu-Muslim unity to critique ideological rigidity and emotional repression. The novel highlights how religious, social, and political structures distort self-perception and hinder human connection. Through a rich cast of characters and historical allusions, Sahgal presents a subtle yet powerful critique of both colonial legacies and postcolonial failures. *Mistaken Identity* ultimately becomes a meditation on psychological conflict and the search for authentic identity.

Keywords: *Religious Dogma, Identity Crisis, Hindu-Muslim Unity, Postcolonial India, Political Fiction, Social Hierarchies, Psychological Conflict*

The novel *Mistaken Identity* confirms Sahgal's central observation. The rebellion of Bhushan's mother, while fantastic in its apparent subtleness, nevertheless symbolizes the way in which subterranean stresses can erupt into unexpected action. The narrator, Bhushan has his own story to tell: he is suffering from his own suppressed past which contains violence, including murder, all directly linked with his thwarted passion for the Muslim girl, Razia. The novel therefore, is centrally about the repressed and unacknowledged self—the true source of “mistaken identity”. Even at the novel's end, when Jumbo is commenting on the meaning of his narrative, he is not free of self-deception:

Many married years later, whenever she and I went back to our beginning to discover what it was that had attracted us to each other, we got it all wrong. My wife insisted she saw a political commitment writ large on my face. I, on my part, said I'd never been able to twist a woman's beauty, or the culture of Islam. The true is, her heart went out to a frightened poet, and was bewitched by a sign of the time. (*Identity*-205)

Throughout the novel Jumbo has denied he is political, possibly because his view of political is too narrow. But I think not. More centrally, he is afraid of – resists—commitment, possibly because his one blinding passion—Razia—had plunged him into a nightmare where “I thought I must be going mad myself, for my eyes were his eyes. . . . I could not tell where he left off and I began.” (*Identity*-200)

The person he is identifying with, his former servant, had committed murder in a rage of jealous: in parallel circumstances so had Jumbo. At this point of the novel, Jumbo reaches the depths, “not knowing how to bear the pain of what I'd done.” So he chooses to deny his nature, which he has done throughout the novel, shattering behind the guise of a retiring poet, while

every shred of feelings pulls him towards one great cause—the achievement of Hindu-Muslim unity. He has no program, however, and is not a political activist.

The ironic, reflexiveness of the novel is made even more complex by the way Sahgal manipulates time within it. In order to lay her procedure bare enough for the purpose of discussion, somewhat belatedly, offer some summary of the story. The narrative begins in Bombay with Bhushan, returning from a trip to America. He delays in Bombay to oblige Sylla, a Parsee friend and occasional lover, by performing a small part in “her modernized version” of *The Scarlet Letter*. At the end of his home, Vijaygarh, pointedly linking his disappearance with “Hester’s husband.” His reason for leaving, and the point of his allusion to *The Scarlet Letter* is revealed in pieces throughout the novel, through a series of psychologically driven flashbacks.

The driving force behind his reluctant review of his past is his arrest and imprisonment while on the train to Vijaygarh. Apparently mistaken for a conspirator against the King Emperor of India, he is jailed along with three trade unionists and an assortment of communists. His quasi-aristocratic social background- his father is a minor raja who is petitioning for a hereditary title- separates him from his cell-mates who decide to explore his life as a case-study.

For Jumbo the end of the Khilafat, and the success of Mustafa Kamal Pasha represents the best model of reform and modernization of Islam. The imprisonment of Tsar and subsequent execution, however, are seen as a loss for humanity, despite the ambiguous opportunity for liberation of a repressed class that it represented.

The occasion of Jumbo’s poem for Hindu-Muslim unity is in support of the restoration of the Khilafat,-a support given in India by Hindu and Muslim jointly. However, Jumbo sees the parade of pious sentiments as being part of a charade designed to entrench divisions, not overcome them. His emotional plea for Hindu-Muslim unity is plea to sweep aside dogma and

ritual observance-to ditch tradition and move towards recognition of each other's humanity. In particular, his plea is for Hindu-Muslim marriage.

The expression is extravagant and provocative; the trend of his sentiment, however, towards universal brotherhood and liberalization of the individual, seems to be endorsed by every line of the book. This is underlined by Sahgal's insistence that the separation of the religious communities, as well as the maintenance of the caste system, has been a feature of British policy. It is neither inherently nor politically determined, its ancient roots should be left decently buried. The novel does not deny communal riots, rather it insists on them, but it refuses to enclose a single simple cause.

Second the imprisonment of the Tsar and the rise of Bolshevism. Against their utopian schemes they see Gandhi as "a comma in the middle of a sentence that could read a hell of a lot faster without it." (Identity-80) Sahgal presents their anti-Raj sentiment with simple dignity, especially through the ailing Bhaiji, but is somewhat ironic about their vision.

'The comrades India' is going to be forged out of steel, concrete and electricity, glorified by nuts and bolts. Men will make love to machine parts. . . . It seems entirely possible that men and women will turn into machines.

To be fair, the revolutionaries ironically undercut their own dream by illustrating the deep human emotions that give rise to it. In Sen's singing of the lines "The International party shall be the human race," and Bhushan's recollection of Garibaldi's hymn. "That their dust may rebuild her nation," (Identity-94) the deeper note of the revolutionary is struck. It is no mechanical hymn to nuts and bolts!

Political ideologies and religious dogmas are equally flawed, for they fail to take into account human identity and need. Sometimes through imposition, sometimes by a form of

choice, sometimes as a result of personal fate, we put on or assume identities which not only deceive others-they also deceive our self. As Jasbir Jain has pointed out, there is a network of mistaken identities in the novel. Her tracing of these is through but not complete, but it would be tedious to bring all the kinds of “mistaken identities” to notice. The central point is that owing to the power of dogmas, gender, class and caste to shape and dominate lives, that failure in self-knowledge and knowledge of other is bound to be endemic.

We see each other and ourselves first as belonging to a group, as owing allegiance to a creed or a code, which in proportion as it is binding and rigid, causes division and separation between individuals, and repression of the inner natures within individuals. It may be argued that people can only know themselves in terms of social structures and relations. This is true. However, Nayantara Sahgal has demonstrated in some detail the ways in which social relations, which have the apparent support of ideology, can ossify and become repressive- a denial of one’s human nature.

Mistaken Identity is dotted with significant signposts of the Indian freedom movement. The Lahore conspiracy case is splashed in the novel much in the fashion of a tabloid headlines: “case is closed-with three hangings.... Bhagat Singh and his two close colleagues were executed in Lahore jail yesterday, March, 23 and surreptitiously cremated on the banks of the Sutlej river- Gandhi is out of jail but he could not get the execution stayed.” (Identity-157)

A detailed study of the story line and theme of the four novels chosen for the study and an analysis of the characters in these novels reveal that even though labeled as a political writer Sahgal has given equal importance to other theses such as marital dealings; humanitarian apprehensions; people’s life style, outlook and manner; freedom in diverse manifestations, criticism on traditional Indian life and Gandhian thoughts and philosophy. Through her

efficiently and effectively created characters who are an assortment of people like politicians, high ranking civil servants, and wealthy business tycoons with international connections, she has successfully developed the theme through their words, thoughts and actions. Besides the characters, other devices that Sahgal has used in her novels like the setting and mood also help in revealing the theme of her stories.

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