

## Autobiographical elements in Nayantara Sahgal's "Prison and Chocolate Cake".

**Dr. Shirisha Deshpande**

M.A, M.Phil, PGCTE, Ph.D

Assistant Professor

Chaitanya Bharathi Institute of Technology, Hyderabad.

### **Abstract**

"Autobiography is an account of life which begins with the beginning of a memory and ends with the creation of life". The present paper tries to focus on the autobiographical elements in Nayantara Sahgal's "Prison and the Chocolate Cake". Sahgal brings out the elements of subjugation and suffering of women, social ups and downs of her own country. She also brings out the political situation which was prevalent at that time. The main themes of her novels are politics and Indian women, Indian tradition. She concentrates on the identity of a woman, exploitation of woman. The characters that she presents in the novels are the reflection of her own self and the problems that she has undergone as a woman and at the same time exposes the real situation that was going on in the society. She feels that woman should recognize her potential as a human being.

The focus of this autobiography is on the freedom struggle of India and her parent's role in them. Prison and chocolate cake is full of memories of her family, the importance given towards the political life by her family at Anand Bhavan in Allahabad. Her Writings Possess the qualities of a journalist which shows her interest in the minute details of the political life.

"From fear set free" is a follow-up of the first one "Prison and the Chocolate cake". It projects the Gandhian influence on the writer. In this novel the writer's personal experience is projected more than the political activities. The essence of both the books is through her personal experience the writer reaches the freedom of her spirit. It is the depiction of her own story in two main parts namely "From fear set free" and "Prison and the Chocolate cake". In her introduction to the book she gives the address of her home and says that the book was written "The House at 30, Aurangzeb Road" allotted to her mother, Vijayalakshmi Pandit when she was elected as a member of India's first elected Parliament. Right from her childhood she was very much influenced by Gandhian Ideology.

The Introduction to her life story states her intention behind writing her life story: "Prison and Chocolate cake" was intended for myself and my family, and for the circle of friends who had become part and parcel of the atmosphere it described." Her Autobiographies not only depicts

*her past but also about the entire nation. On oneside her focus is on the freedom struggle of India, on the other side it is her own self.*

**Key Words:** *Autobiography, "Prison and the Chocolate cake, Gandhian Ideology, freedom struggle.*

### Full length paper

“A literary genre which expresses individual experiences based on a memory can be called a memoir. These memories are Autobiographies that usually emphasizes what is remembered rather than who is remembering”<sup>35</sup> The author instead of recounting his life, deals with these experiences of his life, people and events that he considers most significant.” “An Autobiography is an examination of the self as both a sovereign integrity and a member of society. Infact the self is at all times both these things and autobiography is an endless stream of Demonstrations of inseparability.”

Nayantara sahgale daughter of Vijaya lakshmi pundit and Ranjit Sitaram pundit, neice of Jawaharlal Nehru. She has written eight Novels, two Autobiographies, two political commentaries, and articles in Newspapers and Magazines. From her childhood she had been observing politics and she says “This is the story of its influence on our lives, and as such it may interest people whose childhood was different from ours”. She says that their life was different because of their parent’s decision to send them to America.

She catches the spirit of freedom right from the beginning of her life. These lines from her life story, “Mamu has already gone. Papu is going in a day or two, and my turn will come next week. You and Lekha and Tara will remain out, but you will be Satyagrahis just the same as we and you will do your bit by keeping the flag flying over Anand Bhawan. This is a big job and you will be helping in the good fight just as much as we are.... We want smiles and grit to win through in this fight which will mean freedom for us all, and for this great big, beautiful India of ours think of it, darling, you and I and Papu and mamu are helping to make her free. Isn’t it something to be proud of and very happy about?”<sup>1</sup> These lines depict the important message Nayantara sahgale got throughout her life. These lines show that Nayantara sahgale and her sisters were the first group of children who have witnessed the Gandhian movement of freedom struggle.

Nayantara remembered all her childhood memories and the people who were around her. People like ‘Hari’ the untouchable, ‘Bansi’ the chowkidar. There was a lot of influence on her personality from the stories what she heard and read and also from the history. Recollecting her childhood days she recorded in her memory that imprisonment was something praise worthy. Taking part in the freedom struggle of India was an important task of her times. As a daughter of the most privileged families she was influenced by politics. In her book she not only described

about the political situation in India, the influence of the circumstances when she was growing up as a child and the family with full of patriotic beliefs.

Offering a key-note to the title she remarks. “Our earliest association with politics was far from – unpleasant. One day, when I was about three years old, we had chocolate cake for tea. It was a treat because ordinarily we had bread and butter. It was a rich, dark cake, chocolate through and through with chocolate swirls on top. while we were at tea, a group of policemen arrived at the house when Lekha asked why they had come, Mummy explained that they had come to take Papu to Prison, but that it was nothing to worry about...”<sup>2</sup> The confident response that was given by Nayantara Sahgal’s mother made them happily bid farewell to their father. From that day onwards Prison has been associated strangely with Chocolate cake. It is the first part of the life story of Nayantara Sahgal.

Right from the first page of the book we come across with many Indian terms and society. Sahgal mentions that her ‘Masi’, Krishna Hutheesing helped her two nieces in the last-minute shopping and bade them farewell with flower garlands and red ‘Tika’ on their foreheads. Her masi gave them a coconut and a wooden box filled with Indian earth. She advised them to bow down before it if they fall homesick. The mother-figure ‘Masi’ advised them how to live in a foreign land. As a precautionary measure, she said: “The thing to remember is to look helpless, but be efficient that way everybody gives you a helping hand and if everybody doesn’t, you can take care of yourself anyway.” Sahgal visited America. That was her biggest study of freedom. While travelling she met different people and she discussed the Gandhian ideology with them. Her sister Lekha spoke about the concept of Ahimsa before few soldiers.

Sahgal and her sisters were so influenced by Gandhian ideology that they defended Ahimsa at the time of Second World War. One of the soldiers expressed to Tara the inner Joy of returning home after the Pacific war. Nayantara Sahgal remarks that their discussion on non-violence made them laugh: “This guy Gandhi must be crazy. Suppose a man came along and killed his sister; would he sit still and not do anything about it?”<sup>11</sup> At this juncture Lekha replied: “Well, even if you believe in fighting, you don’t fight for nothing. You fight for a reason or an ideal. Yet that very ideal is forgotten in all the bloodshed.”<sup>12</sup> Ahimsa and Satyagraha became a part of their lives.

Nayantara Sahgal’s background was different. It was an unusual background. The atmosphere at that time was not conducive to study and it was surrounded by restrictions. That is why they had to go to America for their further education. Their parents didn’t want them to study in India. They wanted them to live in a free environment where they can work, play and live.. Lekha and Tara planned to travel abroad with their minds filled with their home ideologies. Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit was a bit hesitant to send their daughters far away from home. At this juncture Tara’s father remarked: “Would you rather they stayed in India and became more and more embittered day by day by what is going on around them? That would be a complete negation of all that we have stood for and tried to teach them.” At last Mrs. Pandit agreed: “No, I should not like them

to grow up bitter human beings, nursing grudges and hatreds.”<sup>13</sup> Nayantara did her B.A course in History from Wellesley college. She also had learnt Russian language from Vladimir Nabokov. She also had written an article on him. Later she used to visit America frequently. She stayed in Russia for sometime along with her mother and she also had become the brand ambassador to India.

As a family member of Nehru there was a lot of impact of Jawaharlal Nehru and Mahatma Gandhi, mother Vijaylakshmi Pandit and her father Pandit Ranjit Sitaram on her. Recollecting her childhood memories about her mother who was a career woman and who is also a mother she observes: “A career, especially a political one, is proverbially said to rob a woman of much of her femininity. It has never had this effect on my mother.”<sup>15</sup> Mrs. Vijayalakshmi Pandit was a very good cook, good at arranging flowers, very good interior decorator, and all the things that make a house a home. Sahgal is quite overwhelmed by the dexterity of a mother who was the first woman M.P. of India. She mentions that they were associated with their mother in keeping their home beautiful. Every day early in the morning they used to see their mother in the veranda arranging the roses in the vase with great care.. She entertained the guests in the parties thrown at Anand Bhawan with her ‘Silvery’ laugh.

Taking about her pre-independence elections of 1936 her mother stood up for Kanpur constituency. When the results were out she and her sisters were enjoying their vacation at Woodstock. They received a telegram about their mother’s victory in the elections. . She narrates that her mother had been allotted a portfolio of health. Very excitedly Sahgal observes: “All over India newspapers and magazines, flashed Mummies’ picture, beautiful and black-haired, the first Indian woman to become a cabinet minister and one of the first women in the world to hold such a position. We were the proud recipients of congratulations from our friends.”<sup>17</sup> Though Mrs Pandit was a working woman she took care of her kids very well. She devoted her time equally to kids and her home. “Mummy was a person of beauty, warmth and understanding. Her presence was like sunlight and we blossomed in it. When she walked into a room, it became home. When she put her hand to the most ordinary meal, it became a banquet. When we were guided by her, the most unpleasant ordeal became a challenge. We were her ardent admirers.”<sup>20</sup>

Though she was born and brought up in maternal atmosphere she was very much inclined towards her father’s background. As a child of such a family she inherited, a mixed variety of Kashmiri, Kathiawari, Maharashtrian and even western culture. With a great pride for her father’s background, she observes: “After Papu married Mummy he chose to settle in the U.P. the heart of the national movement. So we were brought up in our mother’s home, in the Kashmiri tradition, observing Kashmiri customs and speaking Hindi and Urdu instead of Marathi. But our father’s background was not lost to us, for he had brought to the mannered refinement of the U.P. the irresistible combination of an adventurous Maratha spirit and the brimming gaiety of Kathiawar.”<sup>23</sup>

As it was the time of the freedom struggle Nayantara and her sisters could understand the situation that was prevalent at that time and sometimes discussions were also being held on what is right and what is wrong. It was her father and also her uncle busy telling their daughter's about being a part of the freedom struggle They got a lot of freedom to go anywhere stay and study. Other girls in the society had restrictions.

For Nayantara Sahgal education meant not only the course books but also to study the society, culture, life. They could get time to discuss on various subjects especially about the taboos in India. In the book we even find the good relationship and good understanding between men and women. We even find men encouraging women in education and treat them equally. Women in this book are being projected as very bold, strong, educated, good decision makers.

In the twelfth chapter of her life story entitled 'Nehru's nieces' that we come across Pandit Nehru as a 'Mamu' of young Taru. Here's an author who is a pampered niece of the first prime-minister of India. She lived with her uncle Pundit Jawaharlal Nehru when he was the prime minister of India. She always had a discussion about a variety of the books with her mamu. She always listened to her mamu's speeches when she was just ten years old. All important points she used to note down in a book. She never forgot the speech throughout her life. Even after going back to Newyork she recollected the speech. The speech was: "Wherever in this wide world there goes an Indian, there goes a piece of India with him and he may not forget this fact or ignore it. It lies within his power to some extent, to bring credit or discredit to his country, honour or dishonour.....25 Thus, her mamu's words were not only inscribed in Sahgal's notebook but also in her heart. Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru never turned out to be only a prime minister of India for his nieces. Nayantara Sahgal was never treated as a child and her ideas were equally respected. She always admired him and considered as an ideal person who was always ready to serve the country.

The most striking feature of this autobiography is the relationship between Nayantara Sahgal's father with his children and the relationship of Nehru with his nieces. Sahgal was much influenced by her mamu. She viewed India's freedom through his eyes. These lines show how intimately she knew her uncle "There is a confining sound about the label of prime minister, as there is, for that matter, about any label. It suggests specific duties. In Mamu the human being seemed always ascendant to the label. He was a sensitive person passionately devoted to certain humane ideals before he was anything else. To me he resembled a knight in quest of the Grail or an artist dedicated to the completion of his task, much more than he did a prime minister."27 Thus, Sahgal was much influenced by her mamu in all her Endeavour's. One more person who influenced on her was Gandhiji and his ideology.

In Twentieth century Gandhism not only brought the country together but it became a part of each and every individual who came across it. Gandhiji's idealism influenced the people a lot. Motilal Nehru got inspired so much by Gandhiji's ideology that he sacrificed the comforts, luxuries for the freedom struggle of our country. She didn't like Gandhiji initially when she saw

him for the first time at Anand Bhavan during a Prayer meeting .When her mother asked her to offer roses she refused initially by saying that he is ugly I don't want to give him. In her later years she became a regular visitor of Bapuji's prayers at Birla house and she also sung prayers for him .Sahgal mentions that Gandhiji was the most honorable guest at Anand Bhavan. .

She narrates a feeling of Gandhi in the most remarkable terms: "However often one saw him or watched the crowds react to him, one could not believe that such a phenomenon was possible. It is one thing to recall just one such event in memory and quite another to see it re-enacted over and over again before one's eyes in all its unbelievable magnetism".<sup>29</sup>Thousands of people used to stop the train before it reached the platform. In the last two chapters Sahgal Narrates Gandhiji's death. It was the year 1947 when Sahgal came back to India after her graduation.

Her uncle took her to Birla house where Gandhiji used to stay .Gandhiji greeted her with a child like chuckle and asked her "So! You have come home! What are you going to do now? Not too grown up to talk to me about it, I hope". <sup>32</sup> Gandhiji was much disturbed by the horror and bloodshed in which our countrymen had been engaged. They had forgotten the lessons of non-violence and the brethren were turned into enemies. The partition had brought much tragedy and bloodshed .In 1948 January when Nayantara sahgal went to meet Gandhiji had remarked: "It is good you came to see me today, because the next time you see me will be in a crowd."(p.p.228) above words, spontaneously spoken by Bapu turned out to be true. The next time Sahgal found him in his funeral procession amongst thousands of people. Recollecting the passing away of the great soul Sahgal remarks that on January 30, 1948 while she and Indi were having their evening tea a phone call summoned them to 'Birla House'. They were informed that, "Gandhiji had been shot on his way to a prayer-meeting". <sup>35</sup>

Very meticulously Sahgal has presented a pen-portrayal of Gandhiji's funeral Procession immersion of the ashes in Ganges Allahabad. Sahgal has attempted to conclude her autobiography with the depiction of Bapu's demise and with a sense of self-realization through Gandhian impact. She notes: "It was true that I had not worked with Gandhiji, gone to prison at his call or made any sacrifice for my country's sake. That had been the work of a different generation. My sisters and I and other young people like me, had been merely onlookers. But still I felt at sea and I think the reason was that my feeling of loss went deeper than consciousness". <sup>36</sup>, Sahgal's autobiography is centered on four main figures in her life-her Papu, mamu, Bapu and her mother.

Prison and Chocolate cake depict the first part of her life-story and she published it in 1954.It is a very good example of multicultural society. She and her sisters played the role of Indian companions abroad, defending Indian cultural heritage in every possible way .She brought a new consciousness, particularly the pathetic plight of Indian women .We come to know about her childhood ,her family ,people who were associated with her and her inclination towards Indian freedom struggle .She got inspired by Indian ideology. Her visit to America gave her further education and she got an opportunity to meet different people and preach Gandhian

ideology, Ahimsa and Satyagraha. As she was the niece of Jawaharlal Nehru she got inspired even about Nehru's ideology. Very keenly she used to listen to the Nehru's speeches. She didn't participate in Indian freedom struggle but she felt proud to see her parents participate in the freedom struggle.

Nayantara Sahgal married Goutam Sahgal in the year 1949 who worked for a British firm. Initially they were very happy. They even had three children. Gautam Sahgal was a person who was after money, power and possessions. She became very sensitive to the surroundings and started experiencing a feeling of alienation. She was a person who gave importance to emotions, relations and values. Gautam was a person who never appreciated the literary sense which Nayantara had. In one of her novels she says that "there were pieces of me going into the men and women I created when I really began to write". (Femina 6). She gathered courage and came out of the marriage. She took divorce from her husband. After that she started developing her hobbies and interests and started writing.

As she belonged to the elite class she didn't have any financial problem, but she was very much concerned about the society. From fear set free she expresses her fear of being confined to a way of life with Gautam. We find an urge for freedom in her autobiographies. Through her autobiographies she gives a message to all the women to pursue the path of fearlessness, and fulfill their desires, and be proud of themselves in succeeding all their endeavors and make their country proud.

## References

*Sahgal Nayantara, Prison and Chocolate Cake, P. 3*

*Sahgal Nayantara, Prison and Chocolate Cake, P. 21.*

*Ranjana Harish, translated by Bela Thaker, Bhartiya Strioni atmakatha, Gurjar Granth Ratna, amadavad, 2004.*

*As quoted in Bhatnagar M.K., Encyclopaedia of Literature in English an Article on Sahgal by Attia Abid, P.1618.*

*As quoted in Bhatnagar M.K., Encyclopaedia of Literature in English an Article on Sahgal by Attia Abid, P.1618*

*As quoted in Bhatnagar M.K., Encyclopaedia of Literature in English an Article on Sahgal*

*by Attia Abid, P.1618*

*.Sodhi Meena, Indian English Writing. The autobiographical mode, creative books, New Delhi, 1991, P. 138 – 139.*

*Sahgal Nayantara, Point of View, A Personal; Response to Life, Literature & Politics, prestige Books, New Delhi, 1997, P -17.*

*Sahgal Nayantara, Prison and Chocolate Cake, Harper Collins India, reprinted in 2007, first published in – 1954, Introduction, P. 18.*

*Sahgal Nayantara, Prison and Chocolate Cake, Harper Collins India, reprinted in 2007, first published in – 1954, Introduction, P. 4. 11. Ibid P. 16.*

*Sahgal Nayantara, Prison and Chocolate Cake, Harper Collins India, reprinted in 2007, first published in – 1954, Introduction p.16*

*Sahgal Nayantara, Prison and Chocolate Cake, Harper Collins India, reprinted in 2007, first published in – 1954, Introduction p.16*

*Sodhi Meena 'Indian English Writing – The Autobiographical Mode', creative books, New Delhi, 1991, P. 140.*

*Sahgal Nayantara, Prison and Chocolate Cake Harper Collins India, reprinted in 2007, first published in 1954, P. 27.*

*Sahgal Nayantara, Prison and Chocolate Cake Harper Collins India, reprinted in 2007, first published in 1954, P. 29-30*

*Sahgal Nayantara, Prison and Chocolate Cake Harper Collins India, reprinted in 2007, first published in 1954, P. 30*