

AN INTERPRETATION OF THE PHILOSOPHY OF KARMA IN NAYANTARA SAHGAL'S *A TIME TO BE HAPPY*

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ABSTRACT

Nayantara Sahgal is one of the distinguished Indo-English writers who wrote in the stream of national consciousness. The present paper provides an insight into the interpretation of the philosophy of Karma as the protagonist in the novel, A Time to Be Happy, begins to identify his roots and realize that it is the time to be happy. The novel evokes realistically and vividly the immediate pre-and post-Independence era. The novel gives a graphic account of the turbulent period when the nationalistic fervor was at its peak and a wave of Gandhism swept the country. Rather than presenting dull rhetoric about the Gandhian thought, the novel presents a gallery of characters, who feel on their pulse the charismatic influence of Gandhian ideas and values.

Keywords: Dignity of labour, Gandhian ideas, identity, Karma, Nationalism, Self-discovery.

INTRODUCTION

Nayantara Sahgal deals with problems caused by a changing order. She presents new philosophy in her novels including one's own identity and roots. The novel *A Time to be Happy*, is based on the character of *Sanad Shivpal*, the son of a rich man, a typical product of a public school, an executive in mercantile firm and a good tennis player. Most of his problems are the problems of the west-educated boys returning to India and encountering in him the conflict between the two sets of values.

This novel offers a more faithful picture of the period of independence and tells about the Gandhian movement during the forties. *A Time to be Happy* embodies the enthusiasm and starry-eyed optimism of India just after independence. Gandhi represented the fine flowering of Hindu heritage.

The philosophy of Karma itself can be seen as encouraging passivity if man's present life is seen as the result of his past action. However the human beings should take it as a challenge according to their capabilities to shape a better future. There are "two opposite tendencies that create the pattern of Indian life: a forthright sensuality existing side by side with a stark and stoic resignation. Similarly other opposing tendencies exist side by side: Violence and non-Violence, materialism and spiritualism, acquisition and sacrifice, enjoyment and abnegations".¹

A Time to be Happy is the only novel which has the pre-Independence context as parts of its background. Nayantara Sahgal favors Gandhian philosophy of 'Karma' for the growth of the people in all realms- social, economic, religious and political. In the changed context, India was marred by violence, caste and class conflicts, regionalism, popularism and unscrupulous craze for power and only a rooted philosophy of *karma* had wherewithal to minimize the cacophony and violence.

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The Main Study

A Time to be Happy is primarily concerned with the socio-political life of the turbulent period of Indian history just before the advent of independence. *A Time to be Happy* is really a story of Sanad, the son of a *zamindar*. In spite of his western education, Sanad has a profound respect for tradition. He is aware of the political and social forces. But Sanad is shown as "nearly English young man brought up to be a success, puzzled and uncertain about his future".² Here is awakening of Sanad's conscience and his attempt at and success in self-discovery and identity. Sanad joins the English firm of Selkrik and Lowe at their office in Saharanpur and cultivates western value. Sanad learns Hindi and spinning and contemplates to switch over to dhoti-kurta style of dress. His employer, Mr. Trent notices all these activities and warns Sanad but he boldly informs him that nothing is wrong with his activities and the steps which he has been taking are only to familiarize himself with his own country. He marries Kusum. After his marriage to Kusum, who comes from a nationalist background Sanad's main concern is how to regain his roots. Nayantara Sahgal presents through his character the conflict between Eastern and Western values. He is fully aware of his dilemma of being rootless. He mourns his fate. He gives a clear expression to his sense of isolation:

"... It is a strange feeling to be midway between two worlds, not completely belonging to either. I don't belong entirely to India. I Can't. My education, my upbringing, and my sense of values have all combined to make me un-Indian. What do I have in common with most of my country men?"³

Sanad is so much troubled at his rootlessness that he even declares to resign from the British firm where he is working. By learning Hindi and by spinning homemade cotton yarn, he finds a feeling of belonging to his roots. He comes to have a healthy respect for tradition and overcomes trauma of rootlessness. Sanad has the talent to be happy.

One of the main aspects of the works of Nayantara Sahgal is her concern with religion and religious attitudes in which she believes. By the sixth century B.C., belief in metempsychosis developed into the doctrine of the transmigration of soul and the law of Karma (literally 'deed'); the law that one's next life is a causal extension of one's deeds performed in the past and present lives. All living beings are thus deemed to be self-trapped in the eternal cycle of birth, death and re-birth (*Punarjanma*) until *moksha* is attained through intelligent action and meditation.

"The universe and its sub-system including human society were seen as organic wholes in which each *jati* (on the cosmic plane a form of life, on the social plane a class or community) has a specific task (*dharma*) to perform. Only in the faithful, dispassionate performance (*niskam karma*) of this duty can an individual acquire merit and a higher station in the next life".⁴

As the narrator in the novel explains, "the central philosophy of Karma itself can be seen as encouraging passivity if man's present life is seen as the result of his past actions".⁵ However, the doctrine can also be taken as a challenge for it is within human capability to shape a better future. Further V.S. Naipaul describes:

"Karma, the Hindu killer, the Hindu calm, which tells us that we pay in this life for what we have done in past lives. So that everything we see is just and balanced, and the distress we see is to be relished as religious theatre, a reminder of our duty of ourselves, our future lives."⁶

Dr. R.A Singh observes Nayantara Sahgal's first novel *A Time to be Happy*, based on the central philosophy of Karma can itself be interpreted to support two ways of life. On the one hand, it encourages passivity for man's present life as the result of his past actions, on the other it is a challenge for human power to create a better future for himself. The narrator in this novel places responsibility on the individual. Similarly other opposite attitudes exist side by side; violence and non-violence, materialism and spiritualism, acquisition and renunciation are all part of traditionalism. The division between illusion and reality, non-attachment and inhumanity are all related to tradition. Nayantara Sahgal's sense of tradition is accompanied by a sense of genial tolerance and a belief that traditional faith can coexist with a liberal and enlightened attitude. It need not be an inhibiting factor in development of life.

Maya seems as a contrast to the traditional ideal woman in the tapestry of this novel. Maya is the *Pativrata*, the self-negating Indian Hindu woman. Maya Shivpal at the age of sixteen was married to Harish Shivpal, a flamboyant, extravagant and anglicized man. For Maya, marriage was doomed from the beginning, chiefly on account of the opposite personalities of her husband and herself. She had the cool purity of the eucalyptus, as compared with his extravagant *gulmohar*. She was the mirror-smooth lake to his rushing waterfall. The marriage had all the enviable facade money could buy, everything that was considered important by the world. But there was lack of fragrance or the productivity inherent

in a living breathing plant. In short, it was a sterile marriage, leaving them arid. Maya is highly individualistic but still bound by conventions. She is the woman who does not fight, defy conventions, justice and attain individual fulfillment. Maya is silent victim at the altar of marriage. She suffers because she refuses to submerge her individuality and cling to her personal identity at all costs.

Maya feels "*Whether we live or die is not important unless it is important to someone*".⁷ She considers the most important thing in life is emotional response and which she is unable to receive from her husband. Krishna Sharma remarks:

"The Indians bear everything in the name of fate and Karma, because Hinduism professes obedience as a paramount duty, it does not equip and encourage people to make choice and value judgments, in times of crisis. A Hindu is not responsible to anyone except himself and his God. Therefore, he rarely acts or reacts objectively for the good of society or country".⁸

Nayantara Sahgal's novel deals with eternal search for freedom-freedom to express themselves, freedom to be their own selves. Ammaji, Govind Narayan's mother is highly individualistic and refuses to submerge her identity into that of her husband's. They belong to two different worlds-he is an indolent, pleasure-loving man and she disdains luxury and resists his efforts to mould her to his liking. "*She had been in her youth, a woman of character, at a time when character was not admired in women of breeding*".⁹ She is proud of her nation and its culture and is pained to see Harish and Sanad ape the Western culture. She is neither orthodox nor against modernity. She wants that younger generation should be aware of their own background where their roots lie, even while learning Western education. She is pained to see them transformed into strangers. She has disapproved her husband's way of living but continues within the fold of family. She has the spirit of independence that makes her realize the value of self-help and dignity of labour.

Sohan Bhai, a Gandhian freedom fighter, involved in the Quit India Movement (1942) in Bengal. He runs a home for children orphaned during the Bengal famine. Sohan Bhai and Kunti Bhen, deal mostly with upper class family. Hence they are Khadi clad workers. Social work symbolizes a way of life where duty is more important than happiness. Sohan Bhai is a follower of Gandhian ideology. Mahatma gives him a sense of direction. He had not given him any conventional balm, but sent back to the misery of the people made him aware that he still had a feeling within him. He would decidedly tend to the injury to his body or satisfy hunger. He told him:

"Even if you are interested only in yourself, then you are interested in: a fragment of humanity and the way is open for you to reach all human creatures. Do not die before your death".¹⁰

Through Sohan Bhai, one learns of the all-encompassing movement launched by Gandhi to arouse and uplift the people. The impact of the Gandhi's ideology was so deep that Sohan Bhai makes the whole of the country his home. Gandhi's message cuts across simplistic social, political or spiritual, formulations. There is rising extremism, fundamentalism, obscurantism and populism. There is ceaseless campaign against the evils of drinking meat-eating and to get vaccinated against disease.

The characters of Nayantara Sahgal decisively and responsibly move around all walks of life, private or public. She presents self-imposed helplessness to the inadequate creed that these people live by. In diverse ways does religion affect the action of human being and far from becoming a creed of action, when it is in the hands of the unscrupulous; it becomes a tool of exploitation. Nayantara Sahgal believes that religious leaders try to confuse issues by equating caste with Karma. This confusion made the Hindus resign themselves to their fate. Religion becomes a tool of exploitation due to the wide- spread ignorance and illiteracy in the society.

For Nayantara Sahgal, religion is "*the awareness of the good*". It alone is beneficial and has the ultimate value. This awareness is taken to be universal and dynamic.

CONCLUSION

The challenging aspects of the theory of Karma are provided by the narrator in this novel. It presents the belief in Karma as the possibility of framing one's own future one-self.

In the novel, Nayantara Sahgal gives message of '*nishkam Karma*' especially the '*Karma*', the dynamic aspect of action. The novelist visualizes a reinterpretation of Hinduism which would enable people to participate actively and responsibly in the happenings around them. The way out is to emphasize the challenging aspects of the theory of Karma

along the lines provided by the narrator in *A Time to be Happy*. It would involve people in what is here and now.

Mahatma Gandhi believed in Karma as the source of all values and as a symbol of all good. The narrator in the—novel has been seen in his capacity as both thinker and doer. Nayantara Sahgal reveals her protagonist fighting valiantly against repressive forces -political as well as human - inspired by action oriented creed. The philosophy of Karma- rejection and rebellion against oppression seeks to bring happiness and redress from the evils of social life.

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