

Nayantara Sahgal's Mistaken Identity (With the Elements of Various Literary Theories)

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Abstract

Nayantara Sahgal is an Indian woman writer who belonged to the Nehru-Gandhi Family. She received the Sahitya Academy Award for her writings. The whole story of 'Mistaken Identity' revolves around a character called 'Bhushan Singh.' Bhushan Singh is the protagonist of the story. He was the son of the Raja of Vijayagarh. While narrating the story, the author explored various aspects of literary theories, including colonialism, Feminism, and Modernism. This article on 'Nayantara Sahgal's Mistaken Identity (With the Elements of Various Literary Theories)' reveals how Sahgal covered in her novel the days of colonialism, the British unrestricted power over Indians, the practice of the Purdah system, and also the gender discrimination that prevailed in India. This article also displays the changes in people's ideas due to Western influence.

Keywords: Indian Woman Writer, Literary Theories - Colonialism, Feminism, Modernism, Protagonist

Nayantara Sahgal was born on May 10, 1927. She is a part of the Nehru-Gandhi family, the second of the three daughters born to Jawaharlal's sister, Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit. She won the Sahitya Academy Award in 1985. Her significant books are Rich Like Us (1985), Mistaken Identity (1988), A Voice for Freedom (1977), The Day of Shadow (1971), and Plans for Departure (1971). Though she was a part of Nehru's family, she developed a reputation for maintaining her independent critical sense. On October 6, 2015, Sahgal returned her Sahitya Academy Award to protest what she called 'Increasing Intolerance and supporting right to dissent in the country.' In September 2018, she was elected Vice President of PEN International.

Characters in Mistaken Identity:

1. **Bhushan Singh:** He is a protagonist. He is the prince of Vijayagarh. He narrates the whole bunch of events, his past, and the unexpected involvement of different people in his life. He is a significant character in this novel.
2. **Sylla:** She is a friend of Bhushan Singh. She is a Persian by birth. Instead of returning to Vijayagarh, Bhushan Singh visited Bombay as Sylla invited him to have his presence and performance in Drama.
3. **Razia:** Bhushan Singh loved Razia in his teenage. As she was a Muslim girl, there were clashes between Hindus and Muslims. To keep away from riots, Bhushan Singh was sent abroad.
4. **Bhaji & Sen:** Both were comrades in prison. They fought against the British. They were with Bhushan Singh, who was accompanying him all the while in prison.
5. **Nauzer:** He was a lawyer for Bhushan Singh. He had filed a lawsuit in court to support Bhushan Singh. Though he had tried, he took a long time to release Bhushan Singh from jail. At last, he married Sylla.

A brief narration of the story “Mistaken Identity”:

The novel ‘Mistaken Identity’ starts with the protagonist Bhushan Singh, the only son of the Raja of Vijayagarh, who was about to board a ship in Bombay. Three port inspectors examined his passports before he was stamped with the permission to land. The whole narration was done by a protagonist who was none other than the hero of the novel. Sylla, his Persian friend, invited him to Bombay to help her on-stage performance with his involvement. Instead of returning to his place, he went to Bombay to satisfy his friend. He decided to turn back to Vijayagarh after the drama performance. He took the train to Vijayagarh from Bombay. Unexpectedly, he was arrested by an Anglo-Indian police sergeant with a warrant in his hand. Singh was flabbergasted. He could not understand the reason for his unexpected arrest. Over time, he was sent to jail. His father, Raja of Vijayagarh, appointed a lawyer to fight his case in court. Efforts to release him from prison failed several times. Over the next three years from the time of his arrest, he lived in his memories of his childhood days, his love with Rajia when he was in his teenage, Hindu – Muslim clashes at Vijayagarh due to his love, his father’s entry with a third wife and his mother’s hurt feelings when her husband was married, his days in abroad & his extended love to Sylla. During the three years of his imprisonment, he was placed

in prison among the people who were ready to sacrifice their lives for Bharat (India). Though he was not interested initially, their influence fell on him as the days passed. Directly, Bhushan Singh did not plan for any protests against the British, but he was also a part of the protests. Amidst several struggles, he was released from prison.

Feminist perspective:

The feminist literary criticism of the present is the direct product of the 'women's movement' of the 1960s. It realized the significance of the images transmitted by literature and saw it as vital to fight them and question their authority and coherence. A significant effort was made in the 1970s to depict the contrivances of patriarchy, that is, the cultural 'mindset' in men and women that proliferated sexual inequality. In the 1980s, the mood changed.

- Firstly, it focused on 'the findings and approaches of other kinds of criticism.'
- Secondly, it reconnoiters the nature of the female outlook and reconstructs the lost or suppressed records of females.
- Thirdly, attention was shifted to building a new genre in women's writing to bring the neglected women writers to light.

Indian women novelists have turned towards the lady's reality with unusual reflections. They have driven an expedition inside to study the private insights of the woman's character. Anita Desai & Nayantara Sahgal did not treat women as goddesses, but they exhibited them as beings who are ready to take the step to move from bondage to freedom, from fear to self-oriented, and from threats to zeal. The novel's prominent idea is to realize ladies' abuse of women regarding race, sex, class, and sexual orientation. The fundamental issues, including Sati, female child murder, purdah (female disengagement), and confinement on female training, etc, are included in most of the women's writings in India. Nayantara Sehgal revealed through her novel 'Mistaken Identity' about the purdah system, marriage without passionate involvement, and love without regard. She precisely built up a genuine portrayal of man-woman relationships, focusing on the mutual influence exerted on each other's lives. She depicts the exploitation of women in both traditional and modern contexts and fights against the injustice. Her feminist ideas of women's independent existence were revealed when she tried to focus on the inner consciousness of her women characters. The novel presents a gamut of female characters highlighting and illustrating the multifaceted nature of women's experiences, from the rebels to those who simply accept their roles,

Women focused in the novel:

Razia: Bhushan Singh, the protagonist of the novel 'Mistaken Identity,' loved Razia. His attraction towards her created clashes between the two families and two religions. As Bhushan belonged to an affluent family, Bhushan was protected, but Razia was married very young. She was not even allowed to venture outside the world.

Bhushan Singh's mother: She could not protest her husband when he had married another woman before her eyes. Her feelings were hidden behind the walls of her palace. Though she did not like seeing her husband move with another woman, she could not express her views. There was no regard and no passionate involvement in their marriage.

Sylla: She was Bhushan's friend. She was a Persian woman influenced by the Khilafat Movement. Her thoughts were modern. Through her character, the author tried to support the views of women.

Willie-May: Daughter of Bhushan's father's friend. She was very close to Bhushan and tried to influence Bhushan with her modern thoughts.

Nayantara Sahgal took each woman's character from a different perspective. She focused on social evils that prevailed in India. Through the characters of Razia and Bhushan's mother, the writer revealed how the purdah system and gender discrimination prevailed in India. Razia and Bhushan got attracted to each other. Excitedly, they broke their limit, bunked the classes, and went to the suburb of their place for a few hours. Both were caught red-handed and were sent back to their family members. As Bhushan was from a wealthy family, he was secretly managed and was given treatment for his ill health. But Razia was blamed, and she was married suddenly at a very young age. Her parents restricted her entirely, and she was also not allowed even onto the streets.

Bhushan's mother was confined to her limited space between the high walls of her palace. She developed a very little acquaintance with the outside world. The customs of those days confined her to a room, and if she wanted to see the outside world, she would go either in Bhushan's father's car or her carriage.

“ Mother saw the world through the slit between her carriage curtains when she went out, more rarely through tinted glass after Father bought cars because she preferred her carriage”(Sahgal, 2007, p. 32)

Sylla and Willie-May were different from Razia and Bhushan's mother. Westernization and modern thoughts influenced both. They could express their views openly without

hesitation. They are clear examples of how women in this modern world can affect the other gender and lead society.

Elements of History in Mistaken Identity:

The novel runs from the 1930s to the 1950s, when India focused on achieving independence.

Meerut Conspiracy Case (1929): The central plot involving the protagonist, Bhushan Singh, being falsely arrested for conspiracy, is based on this real historical case, where trade unionists were jailed

Khilafat moment: During Indian Independence, the Khilafat movement also took a leading role. It was the moment headed by Sultan Caliph, whom the Allies bullied. He had declared a Jihad against the Pasha. He had promised faithful rewards in this world and heaven in return for the dead body of Pasha. Sylla's family, being the Persians, was influenced by this moment. Slowly, this moment disappeared due to the Civil War in Turkey.

“Sylla's work for the Khilafat cause fizzled out – not because I had disgraced myself at her meeting, but because the Khilafat movement was fizzling out. There was Civil war in Turkey, and the Sultan —Caliph's imperial Turkey was getting the worst of it.” (Sahgal, 2007, p. 163)

Hindu –Muslim clashes: The protagonist discussed the religious differences between Hindus and Muslims in India. The novel's author disclosed the religious clashes in India by creating the feeling of love between a Muslim girl and a Hindu boy. Due to the clashes in India, this small wrong step by the teenagers was a big issue. It had taken more than two months to mitigate the clashes.

“A mob of five or six hundred had made Hindu- Muslim with knives, stones, and broken bottles on the front lawn of the female college. Someone set fire to one wing, and the mob stampeded in to loot pots and pans and sewing machines with yells of 'Allahu Akbar' and 'Ram Ram.' (Sahgal, 2007, p 70)

British Colonialism:

The novel Mistaken Identity covers the 1930s—the 1940s—when the Independence movement was at its peak stage. The people of India were treated as slaves. Indians were given

the least importance, and their talent was not recognized. The inheritance of the kings and zamindars was also decided according to the interests and convenience of the British.

“The commissioner was drawing up a list of candidates who might be eligible for rajahood if they passed all the tests, and he was on it. District officers were checking up on candidates.”(Sahgal, 2007, p. 35)

People who were against the British instructions were imprisoned and tortured in jail.

‘Now we’re nothing but rent receivers for the British and spend our lives pocketing their insults’ (Sahgal, 2007, p. 32)

Many of the innocent people who supported Gandhi’s Satyagraha movement were brutally lathi-charged and killed in the agitations. Some of the people were thrown in jail without any reason.

The book ‘Mistaken Identity’ prominently covers the ‘identity crisis’ experienced under colonial rule. It shows how Indians felt like ‘slaves in their own country’. ‘The very title of the novel, ‘Mistaken Identity’, explicitly focuses on the protagonist’s ‘unjustified charge’ of disloyalty toward the British. Due to which, the protagonist collapses his own identity. He struggles for freedom and to prove his authentic self.

Gandhi’s Civil Disobedience Movement: -

Bhushan remained in jail. Even after many attempts by his lawyer, his case was postponed, and he remained in prison. He came to know about the independence movement through his comrades. He did not directly participate with his colleagues, but he was there with his jail colleagues, such as Bhaiji. He imbibed some of the words of Bhaiji: **"A Satyagrahi must be prepared to suffer- jail is an honor"** (Sahgal, 2007, p. 119). Freedom will come of spinning thread. By the end of April that year, people in jail came to know **“Gandhi had marched to Dandi Beach. A distance of two hundred and forty-one miles from his base, to disobey the salt act and manufacture salt on the seacoast. A Civil disobedience campaign was in full swing. Our newspaper says immense crowds cheered him on, and thousands joined the March.”** (Sahgal, 2007, p. 121)

Hunger Strikes and Political Imprisonment: It depicts the harsh treatment of Indian prisoners, including hunger strikes (such as Jatin Das's death in Lahore jail) and mass arrests under false charges by the British government

Modernism

The period of high Modernism was twenty years, from 1910 to 1930.

Some of the literary 'high priests' of the movement.

Modernist of English Writing: T.S. Eliot, James Joyce, Ezra Pound, Wyndham Lewis, Virginia Woolf, Wallace Stevens, Gertrude Stein.

Modernists of French and German: Marcel Proust, Stephane Mallarme, Andre Gide, Franz Kafka, and Rainer Maria Rilke.

Modernists of Indian English Writings: Indian Modernism in literature and the arts relied on significant changes in the early nineteenth century when the East Indian Company established its military dominance, financial control, and political supremacy. Some of the modernists of India are Ruth Pawar Jhabvala, Mulk Raj Anand, R.K. Narayana, Kamala Markandaya, Nayanatara Sahagal, Anita Desai...

Most Indian writers of this period tried to express their views based on their contemporary situations. Colonialism, Orientalism, and the social transformation that had taken place in India since the European Renaissance occupied most of their writings.

Some of the essential characteristics of the literary Modernism practiced by these writers

1. A new emphasis on impressionism and subjectivity, that is, how we see rather than what we see
2. A movement away from the apparent objectivity.
3. A new liking for fragmented forms, discontinuous narratives, and random events.

Elements of Modernism in 'Mistaken Identity':

- The story starts with Bhushan Singh landing in Bombay. He had visited Bombay to meet his friend Sylla, who requested that Bhushan Singh perform a ten-line performance on the drama *The Scarlet Letter* by Nathaniel Hawthorne. The protagonist does not continue his story from where he started, but tries to narrate his past.
- **Fragmented forms & discontinued narrative in Mistaken Identity.** The repeated theme in the novel is 'fragmentation of identity' as the characters struggle to merge their past and present selves within a world apparent as confused and disordered. This sense of dissolution extends beyond the individual, reflecting a broader societal breakdown and highlighting the complexities of modern life and the ongoing struggle for coherence.

Bhushan Singh narrates his experiences in fragments. Whenever he encounters an incident that touches him, he takes his readers to his personal experience. The novel does not follow a story with a beginning, middle, and final.

- **Social transformation:** The "changing world" for Indian characters is not just a comprehensive modern condition but specifically incorporates the deep changes brought about by colonialism, the penetrating struggle for independence, and the intrinsic clash between traditional Indian values and Western modernity. 'Mistaken Identity' speaks about the social transformation in India due to colonialism. Due to colonialism, transformation had come not only politically, economically, and socially but also in the way of thinking. People started to imbibe the foreign culture as their own culture. The tradition that they had followed for centuries has taken up a new mode, a new level.
- **Stream of consciousness technique:** This technique is crucial for enabling "deeper psychological exploration and insight into characters' inner lives. By narrating Bhushan Singh's inner complexities and struggles, Sahgal did a deeper psychological exploration. She had used the technique of stream of consciousness as a fundamental tool to intricate the individual consciousness.
- **Non-linearity method:** Bhushan relives in his memory with the extensive use of the flashback method. With a non-linear approach, Sahgal provided a nuanced understanding of Bhushan Singh's motivations, inner conflicts, and the impact of political and cultural influences on his consciousness.

Conclusion: The book *Mistaken Identity* is multidisciplinary and covers various aspects of society. It reveals the days of colonialism when Indians succumbed to the decisions of colonial rulers. While covering the circumstances of those days, the author attempted to approach the matter from the perspective of women, highlighting the differences in the perceptions of modern women and those of a restricted society. The author adopted a fragmented method, touching on the elements of Modernism.

Eventually, the book is worth reading, with modern ideas touching myriad points from 1930 -1945.

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