

Review Article

Rudiments of Syncretism in Nayantara Sahgal's *Mistaken Identity*

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Abstract: In a country like India with diversified culture and social backdrop, syncretism with its delicate manure happens to be a significant phenomenon that has been given due emphasis by Nayantara Sahgal in her novel, *Mistaken Identity*. Sahgal has not only shown utmost concern for a united nation but has tried to bring to the foreground its crude limitations in a multicultural society. Sahgal's prime focus has been for a unification of the humanistic values with the divergent features of various religions prevailed in this subcontinent through the character, Bhushan, the protagonist in the novel. This paper has tried to make a resilient attempt in exploring the unique racial and ethnic prospect replicating the exceptional irreligious and syncretic mosaic that yearns to prevail amidst the multicultural society of human habitation.

Keywords: Ethnicity, syncretic aspects, fundamentalism, egalitarian culture, cognizance of transformation.

INTRODUCTION

The novel *Mistaken Identity* is set up during the time of the twilight years of the British rule in India. Sahgal desires towards explicating a unique platform thereby witnessing the several acrimonious multiethnic rudiments merging into manufacturing a distinctive, harmonious and syncretic assortment that brings under one umbrella the diverse groups united. In this novel, Bhushan, the protagonist functions as the representative of the novelist in this aspect. Bhushan implores for the recognition of the synthesis in the numerous ethnic aspects which eventually paves its way towards an amalgamated culture whereby the different diverged entities find themselves intimate.

In the novel, *Mistaken Identity*, Nayantara Sahgal is very optimistic with regard to envisaging the syncretic aspects of the multiethnic apparition that embraces the inclusive culture of India in an amicable way.

A fine definition of Syncretism can be put forth as the amalgamation of unlike forms of belief or practice. In the words of Burman [1],

The rise of fundamentalism in recent years has obliterated the deep rooted syncretism in Indian culture. In India, few have studied the syncretic phenomenon of local religion though many have studied it in terms of formation of composite culture.

Sahgal views that there is every possibility of an inclusive unity amid the cohorts of diverse religions that would certainly concrete the way for a magnificent India. Sahgal envisions an India as a country in which her associated nationals are empathetic and harmonious with an egalitarian, secular and expanded cultural outfit. A unique glimpse of creative susceptibility in nurturing the spirit of national consciousness is apparently vigilant in Sahgal; moreover she also attempts to mirror the cognizance of transformation and the extraordinary, impulsive means in which the character of the individuals have been shaped thereby having a correlational effect with the rage of the collective life as well as the contending edifices of human ethics and destination.

In the novel, *Mistaken Identity*, an exceptional merger of the distinctive chronological and ethnic ambivalences of the Indian convention has been brought to the foreground. India with its fundamental feature of secular democratic concern as well as the reservoir of rich, age old cultural heritage which is many millennia young appeals for the harmonious co-existence of different religions under the remarkable umbrella of human passion and compassion. India has been pictured in its twilight years of imperialistic rule in

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Nayantara Sahgal's *Mistaken Identity*, bearing the major theme of Hindu-Muslim relationship, having a close significance to the then existing issues eventually leading to India's independence. The storyline in the novel centers around Bhushan the protagonist who is twenty-nine years old, his involvement with Razia, his marriage to another, the experience he accumulates in the jail, Bhushan's mother's parting with her Muslim lover and the psychological and physical turmoil Bhushan undergoes. The novel instigates one's insight into the historical scenario of the mass arrests in India and the death of hunger-strikes in Lahore, Dandi Salt March, civil war in Turkey and rise of Mussolini. In the article, "Historical Consciousness in the Novels of Nayantara Sahgal", Krishna Rao [2], states:

The major legacy of cultural change in modern India has been the new historical sense, containing in itself a feeling for the past as well as an awareness of the future, as both dramatize in the personality of the present. The climate of ideas that one encounter in her novels exemplifies, what Wilson Harris might have called cross-cultural imagination.

The predicament of the protagonist Bhushan, in *Mistaken Identity* that the reader witnesses takes birth because of his unbound love with the Muslim Razia which paves the way towards an uncontrolled communal riot. Bhushan not only experiences being ensnared in the whirlpool of identity crisis but he longs for an eternal quest for identity. He bears the pain of an unhealing wound being in between the mistaken identity

It becomes an experience of nightmare for Bhushan when he lands on the struggling realities of the mistaken identities which exists in the names of Bhushan and Razia. He is alarmed with the crude fact that the Hindu name and the Muslim name cannot be associated by AND. Bhushan's simple, pure, and apparent love becomes the root cause of the communal riot. This incidence not only illustrates the events of everyday life but also suggests religious amalgamation as the only solitary and functional substitute to the unfeeling world of authority, massacres and insatiability. They embody the amalgamated character of Indian culture. Sahgal says in one interview, "My Continuing Character is India":

The kind of history that India has gone through, waves of invasion, conquest and occupation and through that the crisscrossing of races, the cross-fertilization of ideas, religion and languages, there is no such thing as a pure strain there. Bhushan Sing in *Mistaken Identity* falls for Razia because of her face which is the future of communal harmony. She has Hindu eyes and Muslim cheekbones. Similarly, there is the question of Christianity, and certainly part of every Indian like me who has been educated in Christian schools and Indians unlike me who live in a country where foreigners have come and gone leaving their marks on us in various ways [3].

The companionship of Bhushan and Razia does not succeed owing to the predetermined conventional taboos of social barriers erected by the Hindus and Muslims. The resolution to overcome this constraint and succeed in the union of Bhushan and Razia will certainly lead to the discovery of the Indian self – a convergence and a true amalgamation of Islam and Hinduism while giving a profound meaning the very human existence. In the article, "Mistaken Identity – Perspectives on Theme", Singh [4] opines:

But the others who have given the names are identifiers of different faiths and peoples, Muslims and Hindus having different social barriers. Implied in this breakup of barriers is that the discovery of the true human identity in love is a key to the discovery of India itself – the identity of being an Indian that sheds the mistaken identities of being a Hindu or a Muslim. It is also Bhushan's discovery of the true identity of womanhood. [...] What holds Bhushan and Razia might be seen as what holds the contraries of Indian history and tradition so bound in mutual fascination, bound into the identity of composite Indian culture.

It's clearly observed in the novel *The Mistaken Identity*, while on the one hand, the country's struggles to drive itself forward distress the birth spasms of independence to significant heights found to be effective in a sense, while the religious resentment happened to be quite discouraging. Sahgal aspires to see an India which is steady and consistent in its peace resolutions and unrestricted from all kinds of political interpolations, communal disruptions, violence, radicalism and moreover advocating the irreligious democracy. In the words of Bhushan:

The unifiers take care not to let our blood mingle. They don't know, poor sods, we are in each other's blood already. By unity they mean their trumped up unities, public emotions gushed on like taps then each to his liar until its time to tear each other to pieces again [5].

Bhushan wears the impression that Gandhi would embolden Hindu Kings and leaders in constructing cow shelters for their Hindu people and pageants representing Hindu-Muslim unity but not raise the spirits in advocating Hindu-Muslim marriage. Bhushan imagines himself in a dream being questioned by the lawyer about his religion. To that, Bhushan's response was, "I am a Hindu Muslim, "or put it the other way round, lawyer" articulating his secularist spirits (p.144). Sahgal directs her attention on syncretism, the most subtle phenomenon ought to be discussed with emphasis that is very elusive, particularly, in a differentiated culture that prevails in India. In an interview, "My Continuing Character is India" with Salgado, Sahgal speaks:

Hinduism was up against Islam for seven or eight hundred years and so passivity and sycophancy may have developed in the process of staying alive. These characteristics which became inbred in Indians, and may be the society as a whole, are the characteristics to observe. (p.46)

Bhushan appeals for the recognition of the intermingled culture of India as both the Hindu and the Muslim self are deeply, intimately attached. At Sylla's rally in support of the Khilafat cause, Bhushan gives his antiheroic enactment and says, "I challenged them to extricate my Hindu from my Muslim self, if they could. And then I gave a clarion call for Hindu-Muslim marriage". Sexual unity was the acid-test of unity [5]. In this way the novel succeeds in providing with a historical standpoint while trying to venture the epitome of Hindu-Muslim unanimity. In an interview, "My Continuing Character is India", Sahgal says:

One thing I had in mind in *Mistaken Identity* is that there's no difference between Hindu and Muslim. We are one, from the gut. It's not that we partake of each other, we are each other. This is what India means. Secularism not only has a chance, Secularism has been bred into our bones- through being good neighbors living side by side, sharing each other's festivals [3].

Modernization of culture could unfasten subjective freedoms, but that could also instigate for deeper directing appliance. Sahgal foreknows administrations equipped with much less authority and resources, even though they need to shoulder the perplexing tasks of providing improved rudimentary requirements such as nutrition, water, apparel, housing and hygienic sanitation to people whom it should reach. Asnani [6] in his article "Contemporary Politics in the Novels of Nayantara Sahgal", discourses:

She seeks to present in each of her novels a consistent point of view, and moves from suave and irony to a positive constructive vision. In her novels, one discerns a new dimension- a rich native heritage co-mingled with a strong western impact. Hers is indeed a post-Independence sensibility, born of the new challenges the Indians were faced with after gaining independence.

The numerous congruent rudiments of culture are the torch bearers for a society which must not be pasteurized by discord, resentment, rattles, scuffles and disputes, confrontations and other acrimonious elements. In other words, culture must be the substratum of the society in stabilizing peace, tranquility among people with the various concordant rudiments that yearns towards harmonizing humanity to amity.

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