



Evoking Ethos through Life Writing: Interpreting Nayantara Sahgal's Life Narratives *Prison and Chocolate Cake* and *From Fear Set Free*

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Abstract— *An autobiography focuses on individual life while being firmly located in social experiences. The socio-cultural realities of the time aptly find an expression in the autobiographies written by women. Based on memory, experience and identity, women narrators reproduce the cultural modes of self-narration. Autobiographies play a significant role in bringing out cultural criticism and social change; a change in which women find their individual identity. The feminine sensibility arising due to the depiction of these memories is remarkable, presenting Indian ethos, values, and cultural background. Rapid developments in the fields of science, technology, economics and urbanization have affected modern societies immensely, both positively and negatively. Portrayal of Indian tradition, heritage, conventions, customs and festivals form an integral part of the two autobiographies written by Nayantara Sahgal: *Prison and Chocolate Cake* and *From Fear Set Free*. This depiction becomes a symbol through which the reader comes to know about her pride in the Indian ethos and respect for Indian culture. The present paper tries to probe how Sahgal's two remarkable autobiographies invoke posterities to feel dignity and delight in age old Indian ethos and how Sahgal commemorates Indian heritage.*



Keywords— *Ethos, heritage, cultural framework, autobiography, tradition and customs, portrayal of self*

Autobiographies play a significant role in bringing out cultural criticism and social change; a change in which women find their individual identity and respect. Writing autobiography has allowed women to use their voices in spaces that banned them from speaking. Narrating their life stories has made themselves heard, to take ownership of their stories and to finally control the narrative. When a person goes through one's memory and experiences and organizes them through a careful selection, one gives shape and form to the indefinable and fluid self. Such narratives show how their author conceived and organized with efforts for writing 'a narrative on a life that, as Edward Said puts it, one had left as disorganized, scattered, uncentred' (Said 556).

Though life histories focus on individual lives, they are firmly located in social experiences. The socio-cultural realities of the time aptly find an expression in the

autobiographies of women. Ethos may be considered to hold the grounding principles expected to be owned by a general community, the example of which are love, equality, security, respect and so on. In today's world, the rapid developments in the fields of science, technology, economics, industrialization, and urbanization have affected human beings both positively and negatively. As per Cambridge English Dictionary, ethos means "the set of moral beliefs, attitudes, habits, etc., that are characteristic of a person or group" ("Ethos"). From preserving ethos to safeguarding oral traditions, music, crafts, and rituals, women are the quiet architects of cultural continuity. Their role has been both symbolic such as to represent the nation or culture on one hand, and functional as they transmit it to their children and other women. They deeply internalize culture and the religious

traditions, and communicate it to other social groups. ('Women as Bearers of Culture'3)

Cultural ethos in Indian history encompasses the characteristic spirit, beliefs, and values that define a culture and shape its practices, identity, and collective consciousness. It reflects the underlying ideals and norms present in literature, art, and social practices. This concept is evident in Indian English literature and folk tales, where poets and writers draw upon and resonate with the cultural values of their communities (Hiemstra). Cultural heritage is both a product and a process, always encompassing elements of the past, present, and future. It provides a wealth of resources for current and future generations. This is not a passive transmission but an active process of acquisition, preservation, and interpretation (Shongwe). Nayantara Sahgal, a prominent author of twentieth century of international repute, jubilantly writes about the galaxy of festivals celebrated at her home when she was a young girl in her first autobiography *Prison and Chocolate Cake*. Sahgal has written that towards the end of March, the Kashmiri New year, *Naoroz*, would begin with the flame-colored *gulmohar* blossoming in the garden and the household ladies clad in gay new saris. Her mother would wake them up saying '*Naoroz Mubarak*'- Happy New Year:

She would sit down on the edge of our beds, turn by turn, placing in front of her the thali she was carrying. The thali contained raw rice, the symbol of fertility, sweets of milk and coconuts, almonds or pistachio, fresh fruit, flowers, a little curd, a container with powdered red tika, and a mirror. After putting a tika on each of our foreheads with a finger dipped in red powder and curd, and giving us some of the sweets to eat, Mummie would hand us a mirror to see ourselves (Sahgal *Prison* 84).

Liveliest of all the festivals, for Sahgal, was *Holi*, when there were no barriers between young and old, master and servant, stranger and stranger, "At *Holi* we broke all bounds of convention and propriety and indulged in a riot of merry making, smearing one another's faces with colored powder and squirting colored water from syringes on each other and even on passer-by in the street" (*Prison* 84). The little pond where her father had carefully planted lilies would be rudely disturbed as dignified leaders of society; justices of the High Court, Congress Chiefs, and visiting dignitaries were carried to it amid shouts and plunged gasping into its cold, slimy depths.

The life writings of women can be seen as powerful social and historical documents. They may be said to have archival value as they provide us with micro-

histories of the times they were written in. Not only do they provide a world and wealth of detail, they also show us history from below. Accounts which offer the everyday practices of women and minorities have gained a unique validity since they offer us history or her story from a different perspective (Malhotra 13). Nayantara Sahgal writes that *Raksha Bandhan* too was celebrated in her family and she has related the story of the Hindu princess Kurnavati sending *rakhi* to the Mogul Emperor Humayun, accompanied by a desperate appeal for help against invading armies. Her sister Rita and Sahgal enjoyed the festival of *Guria Panchmi* more than any other festival when they were children. It was the festival of dolls and celebrated only by little girls. They would dress the dolls in pretty, new outfits, discuss their good and bad qualities, and arrange their marriages. Her mother Vijay Lakshmi Pandit would send for the *Maniharin*, the bangle seller woman, who would glide bangles onto their wrists. Mrs. Pandit's gesture indicate that she tried to provide a normal home life to her daughters despite the elders of the home being busy in various nationalistic activities. *Diwali*, mostly coming in November was the most beautiful of the festivals for Sahgal. She mentions of Rama, coming back from fourteen year's exile and worship of Goddess of Fortune, Lakshmi. Sahgal writes about the sharing aspect of the social life of India when on *Diwali* day trays of sweets and fruits were sent to the homes of relatives and friends and were distributed among the servants, while similar trays came to her house as well.

Women may not have played a dominant role in the recording of what is commonly understood as official history, but they surely have been the epicentres and key forces of social and cultural heritage preservation. They have performed the role of carriers of oral histories and narratives, while themselves being the active bearers and symbols of our social and cultural traditions. Being the nodal points of every familial unit, women have nurtured and sustained these traditions within their families over generations (Tiwari and Badgaiyan). Writing about Allahabad, the city where she was born and brought up, Sahgal has used mythological references in her autobiography *Prison and Chocolate Cake*. She has written that it was a place whose culture was a blend of the ancient civilizations of the *Ramayana* and the much later influence of the Moguls. Prayag was its original Hindu name and the Hindus considered it holy because it was the meeting place of the two sacred rivers, the Ganges and the Jumna. It had an added significance for them because it had been the scene of a moving incident from the *Ramayana*. Bharat met at this very place his elder brother Rama who was in exile of fourteen years then. She has mentioned how Bharat had put Rama's slippers on the

throne and had gone in search of Rama, determined to bring him back to his capital. It was in Prayag that their joyful reunion took place. Talking about the ancient history of Allahabad, Sahgal in her second autobiography *From Fear Set Free* writes, that dating from the time of Mahabharata, the area of Allahabad was scattered with reminders of its history. There was the Ashoka Pillar, erected in 240 B.C.

Women have a crucial role in the global preservation and vitality of cultural diversity and history. Their responsibilities in connection to intangible heritage are particularly important because they contain what may be called core regions and representations of cultural heritage, which are usually necessary for the maintenance of cultural identity (Rezaei 2). In *From Fear Set Free* Nayantara narrates that when she shifted to Bombay, the land of Shivaji, she and her husband were far from the North, moulded by its history of invasions through the mountain passes, its influences of Moghul culture, its civilization of the Ganges that extended from the Himalayas to Bengal. The Marathas, masters of India at the time of the British conquest, embody this difference. Sahgal has given a brief but enchanting account of the history of region by narrating that eclipsed for some three hundred years by Muslim rule, Hinduism revived in the seventeenth century. Under a dynamic and audacious leader Shivaji, the Marathas rose in sturdy guerrilla bands to reduce the imperial Mughal armies.

In the chapter 'Wedding Story', Nayantara Sahgal gives an exquisite description of Indian wedding ceremony and the three important weddings taking place at Anand Bhawan, though manner of each one was quite different from the other. She writes that her family was by no means an orthodox family, but it was a family deeply rooted in the country's cultural traditions. In India, the decisions regarding wedding have been bred on the ideal that all decision should be approached with a studied serenity.

Celebrating the centuries old traditions, heritage, conventions and customs form an integral part of the two autobiographies written by Nayantara Sahgal: *Prison and Chocolate Cake* and *From Fear Set Free*. This portrayal becomes a symbol through which the reader comes to know about her pride over the Indian traditions and respect for Indian culture. Sahgal's outstanding autobiographies invoke mases to feel pride in age old Indian ethos and imbibe them at the same time.

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