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Violence and Oppression in Nayantara Sahgal's *Lesser Breeds*

Abstract:

In this paper I will explore the theme of violence and oppression in the novel *Lesser Breeds*, written by Indian-based writer Nayantara Sahgal. Having a political background of Nehru family and being the cousin of Indira Gandhi (former Prime Minister of India), her fictions deals with India's elite responding to the political crisis. The novel is set in from the year 1932 to the present time of 2000; the past era of the country when people were fighting for their nation's independence under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi who was the chief motivator, idol, and guide for India's countrymen.

Keywords: Violence, oppression, colonialism, post- colonialism, feminism, racism.

The term 'violence' originates from the Latin word 'violentia', meaning 'vehemence', which in turn implies an intense force. As defined by the World Health Organization, violence is "the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community, which either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment, or deprivation". To make it more simple, violence is an act of excessive unrestrained or unjustifiable use of force over others resulting in physical or psychological injuries. Infliction of injury on other people is an essence of violence. For instance, the infliction of injury by police in exercising of state's force is legal. But when the police cross the boundary and inflict injury for lust or personal gain, it turns into violence. Thus, violence is a coercive mechanism to assert one's will over other; the power can be direct or indirect depending upon the kind of injury a victim gets. Broadly, there are two types of violence –first, direct violence which is a sort of physical injury and second, indirect violence which is of psychological harm to any living being. For example, in order to kill a criminal in the street of a town or between crowds, lots of the

innocents also become the victim of the crime. Thus, we can say, anything that abuses others verbally, physically or psychologically, is violence. Scrupulously, violence can be of several types' like- political violence, communal violence, domestic violence, colonial violence, post-colonial violence, social violence, violence against women, racial violence and so on. Similarly, 'oppression' can also be defined as the authoritarian regime that controls the citizens via state control of politics, the monetary system, media, and the military. It refers to the as baleful pattern of subjugation, exploitation in a ruthless form of manipulation and control. The targets of manipulation are marginalized people like women are other indigenous groups in a society. Like violence, there are several types of oppression also like- social oppression, institutional (or legal) oppression, economic oppression, racial oppression, gender oppression, class oppression and so on.

Nayantara Sahgal, a novelist, a political commentator and a journalist has skillfully handled these various sensitive issues of violence and oppression in her works. The political background helped her to have a readymade knowledge of her country's past history and heritage. Her nine novels and eight works of non-fiction, beginning with her memoir *Prison and Chocolate Cake* in 1954, speak amply of her calibre as a skilful wielder of the pen. Sahgal has been part of an advisory committee to Sahitya Akademi Board for English from 1972 to 1975. In 1977-78, she was also the member of the Verghese Committee for Autonomy to Radio and TV. She was also the member of Indian delegation to U.N. General Assembly in 1978 and held the post of Vice-President of People's Union for Civil Liberties. Her name appeared in news recently in 2015, when she returned the Sahitya Akademi Award as a protest against growing intolerance in the country following the murders of rationalists Govind Pansare, Narendra Dabholkar and M. M. Kalburgi, and the Dadri mob lynching incident. Having a political background in the first family of politics, the Nehru's family, politics came to her naturally. Also, being the witness of the country's freedom struggle movements, she is familiar with the causes of generation and repercussions of violence and oppression during that period. A.V. Krishna Rao in *Nayantara Sahgal: A Study of Her Fiction and Non-Fiction* says:

Nayantara Sahgal is perhaps one of our best socio-political novelists today. She is authentic and vivid in rendering the contemporary Indian urban culture with all its inherent, contradictions and imposed controversies (6).

In an interview in *The Hindu*, Sahgal regrets that today's diplomacy which has now no more remained a weapon for peace but as of war. Somehow non-violence has ceased to be an answer to instil sanity in today's society. Further, she firmly believes that today's world affords no place for non-violence, only violence and oppression seems to be a permanent aspect of this hatred society. Take an example of our own daily lives, when we look at people around who just don't care for others and keep on fighting for their own vested interests. In this viewpoint, she opposes the political incident of that time by saying:

Though non-violence is dead in the country which gave it back for its independence, but I would say, a gradual opinion is growing among people for it. Also look at the way people of various countries are opposing the United States' threat of war against Iraq. That is very encouraging.

Lesser Breeds, her most recent novel (published in 2003) depicts the story of a twenty- three old male named Nurullah, who is an English teacher who comes to the city of Akbarabad to teach first- year college students there. Here he encounters a family who is involved in a non-violent resistance movement against British rule. Is non-violence a lunatic's fantasy? Has it any place in the world? Is it relevant in today's world? ... are a few questions that novel poses.

Mahatma Gandhi, a revolutionary idol, came into the Indian political scenario when he joined the Congress party after returning from South Africa .The misery of the countrymen under British rule compelled him to work for these oppressed people. The Congress party escalated its demand for an independent nation under his leadership. Gandhi had the great impact on the minds of the people, and the same is there in the novel also. Even women in the country were not left untouched by his ideas and blindly followed their leader's direction. Sahgal was too, impressed by Gandhiji ideas that rocked the whole nation into one religion. His conscious efforts are largely appreciated in the novel. The novel shows how people followed Gandhiji's ideas of non- violence in offering resistance to British rule. But often his strategically non- violent movements turned into widespread violence across the nation.

The novel weaves the story around the young teacher, Nurullah, in the imaginary city of Akbarabad in 1932. The plot moves from the non-violent freedom struggle movements in India to the year 1968 in America. The first half of the book deals with the Indian scenario where people resort to non-violence as a weapon against the colonial power. The portrayals of Dandi march, Jaalianbagh massacre, Kisan rallies are some of the incidents in the novel

depicting the situations of non-violence turning out into the acts of violence. People of India experienced the wave of colonial violence and oppression from the time when the country was first occupied by the colonial powers; first by the Portuguese, the Dutch and then British rule. From the first invasion, they treated Indians as dogs and treated badly with their brutal oppressed efforts “The Spanish and Portuguese had roasted them on spits, hunted them with dogs, hanged and then hacked their bodies to pieces for dog meat, killed them with forced labour, and infected them with germs from Europe of small-pox, measles and flu”(119).

With the passage of time, the British tactfully conquered the entire nation by controlling its people and capturing the states, starting from the state of Bengal. The novel depicts the invasion: “...Company’s trickery captured Bengal, monopolized its trade, squeezed out the competition from Europe and Asia and beggared the weavers and artisans” (56). However, the continuous oppressed state awakened the countrymen to rise up in the revolt against the colonial rule. Various revolts took place of which the first one was the Revolt of 1857. This movement united people into one power. Many leaders participated in the revolt but ultimately oppressed by the rulers. *Lesser Breeds* highlights the year and the hanging of the personalities like Mangal Pandey and other mutineers: “Mangal Pandey was hanged and other mutineers were more picturesquely dealt with...Mutineers’ skulls and... mutilated sepoy bodies swinging by their necks...” (48). Their skulls and bodies were swung in the streets of the city and people were brutally kept on short rations.

Soon, with the arrival of Mahatma Gandhi in Indian politics, the movements gained new dimensions. In the novel too, a few non-violent movements are described, which ultimately turned out violent. The novel pictures the famous campaign of Dandi March under Gandhiji’s leadership, which turned out violent. The campaign brought many people to follow him in his march from Sabarmati to Dandi. The consequences were, however, turned into violent acts. The British people after receiving this news beaten Indians on their heads leaving them fractured. Nayantara Sahgal pictures the incident as: “Rods had descended on unprotected heads, leaving fractured skulls and broken shoulder on the sand. Then the police had borne down on the inert bloodied bundles and savage kicking had begun” (19). In Dandi March, people followed Gandhi, made salt, and thus, abolished the law of making salt on own. The novel pictures one such incident where punishment was given to people who were following Gandhi; by raiding the salt depot. The book mentions that how the people who raised slogans of Gandhi were thrown into icy water “...had their testicles twisted with loops of rope” (40)

as a severe punishment. Fines were imposed, if people continued to participate in the movement.

The novel also illustrates the refusal of the orders which brought down the cavalry charges against people and penalty was imposed for refusing to serve the British army and police. Afraid of the further movements, the British banned the media in the country for a long period. The novel shows how the edition of *The Weekly* was shut down and people were oppressed and punished for breaking the same, one such incident of a journalist “He edited a newspaper. Took up Kisan problems. At his trial the prosecution charged him...his weekly was shut down” (85). If these were the situations in the politics, the individual personal life was also not very much different. In the city of Akbarabad, Nurrullah, witnessed all the incidents and happenings in the family with whom he lived. The city educates him in various ways, leaving him opposed to non-violence. It seems to him a bizarre way to defend an empire in a violent, unequal world. The family here experiences the non-violent movement under the leadership of Nikhil, preferably called as Bhai in the novel. He organises a non-violent kisan rally against the prevailing zamindari act, which denied rights to the peasants. When the rally was going on and when bhai was presenting his speech, a furious mob entered the place. The speech by him had scarcely ended when Nurullah heard the “sickening thud of lathis on both sides of the packed gathering” (18). The police fired indiscriminately with the result that there “...was a welter of bodies painfully disentangling in a fog of dust. Some lay writhing on their backs, other folded knees to chest like crumpled question...” (19). Soon the violence spread in almost every part of the country. The city of Akbarabad was too in the grip of violent demonstrations “ ..People, who came out of nowhere in their hundreds, wage-earners all, who had everything to lose by marching along banned thoroughfares, singing banned national songs, waving the banned tricolour and landing in jail” (38).

In the meantime, people were ordered to salute the Europeans whenever they passed them. All those who were seen resisting the orders were thrown behind the bars. The agrarian society was also in the grip of violence, and peasants were treated as slaves by the zamindars. They were not given the right to acquire their own land instead had to pay high rents, and a variety of other dues to their zamindars which, in return paid to the British. The novel depicts an incident describing the oppression and brutality by the zamindars :

...deeply moving experience of withering crops, dying cattle and famished shadows of men and women who had been driven into the fields when the rent collectors had

seized their goods, grain and animals to recover the raised rents they could not pay (10).

Halfway through the novel, the scene shifts to an island called America where the Second World War is being fought. Several countries participated in the war against each other to achieve their political goals and to become the Supreme Power of the world. The war fought between two groups – Nazis and Allies – thus, dividing the whole world into two parts. India, too, was forced to participate in the war. Sahgal, through her work, tries to present violence as an ingredient of today's world where caste, communal and political prejudices continue to cause anguish, destruction, and death. Contrary, the horrors of the war always terrifies the common people all around the world. India's forced participation in the war was on the side of British which gradually awakened its countrymen to protest against the Viceroy's dictatorial decision. But the British obdurately refused to accept the Indian request of denying and also, refused to grant independence to the country which they had promised before the war. Thus, India in an oppressive dictatorship had to participate in the war by sending its men and resources in the support of the British. Millions were killed and injured during the war. In the novel, the conversation between American journalists tells the readers about the bombardment on the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki as the outcome of the war. The whole world after the bombardment looked like the flames coming out of a recently exploded volcano:

Thick black ash billowed up blackening the sky and ghostly apparitions floated out of the fog drifting soundlessly past him. Their mouths gaped open. Some had empty sockets for eyes. They were trailing ragged scarves. It was their flesh torn thickly from bone, hanging loose and blowing in the wind like tattered pennants (340)

Thus, the war ended with a huge amount of destruction of men and property. India too was greatly affected by the war. The British, in the meantime, turned out as the sovereign power of the world after the war. Sahgal during the course of her writing the novel regrets the prevailing hatred in the minds of the people against each other. She interrogates people's choice of violent warfare, and hatred as opposed to non-violence, wisdom and peace. The title *Lesser Breeds* of the novel indicates the term used by Rudyard Kipling in the novel to describe native Indians under colonial masters: "You must understand the kind of world it was, made up of Europe and the lesser breeds whom Europe had a right to rule" (153). But Sahgal takes this definition to a greater depth of dismay and despair and talks about the

meaning of lesser breeds as the discrimination that divides rulers from ruled ones, Hindus from Muslims and whites from blacks. However, in the larger context, Sahgal picks up the colour of the skin or race as an issue of impregnable wall separating a man from man. Europeans after winning the war became the champions of the world. They, from the beginning, treated themselves as masters and other countries as their slaves. People were oppressed on the basis of their race. In the novel, racial violence, and oppression are targeted against the blacks by the inhumane treatment of melting them out of the world. Balinese women too were in demand in the slave market. Europeans oppressed these women to satisfy their desires, pleasure, and lusts. The treatment given to negroes was so worse to tolerate. In the novel, negroes and non-whites were harshly punished for refusing to obey their masters: “Orgiastic operative punishments designed for the lesser breeds outside Europe”(340).

The Sunday Express praises Sahgal’s efforts by commenting:

Nayantara Sahgal has taken off her genteel gloves, and socked us in the solar plexus with a book, in scope and stature, literally takes our breath away. Combining history and fiction in a contemporary cocktail is a tough act- more so when the novel not only delves into acrimonious issues such as the partition of India, but also unveils dissonance in prevailing sacrosanct ideologies such as non-violence, and religious fundamentalism, legacies we grapple with until today. The reader is advised the line of least resistance as Sahgal’s novel grabs you by the eyeballs and hunkers you along a tumultuous century of pre and post- Independence India, maintaining a steady cadence of finely tuned words.

The subject has been on Sahgal’s mind for quite long and rather than to just brush it away, the writer expressed her sensitive, and deep concerns towards the ending world in her work. Hate, anger and desire have the ultimate power in shaping the whole world into its ending grips. Violence and oppression in any form can be seen throughout the world and the world will end soon if these situations continue to prevail. Through *Lesser Breeds*, the author has tried to explore a wide canvas of sharing her pain over dissipated dreams. And, thus, it is a call for people now to wake up and reconsider non-violence as a strategy for handling differences. Sahgal said that the anti-war demonstrations all over the world prompted her to write the novel. She, through *Lesser Breeds*, wants to convey the need for peaceful, non-violent and democratic methods as opposed to violent and oppressed acts of negotiating conflicts. The novel finally ends in 1968 with a hope of looking back and reconsideration of

Nurrullah of what he has become. His experience makes him reject violence and oppressive acts of the world. While American journalist comes searching for surviving strands of non-violence when disarmament remains a distant dream. Nor does non-violence puts an end to violence. Sahgal through her this novel talk about non-violence, peace, and democracy as pertinent aspects in today's world as were in the past decades. But, she also explores the possibility that non-violence is the fantasy of one man which may or may not work with the majority of mean-minded people by saying:

Good old-fashioned war was waged against ahimsa and ahimsa did not escape war's legacies and tragedies, war's prisoners, its wounded and its killed...No lethal weapon-wielder stood back and said this man before man before me is unarmed so I will not strike (114).

This, according to Nurullah, in the novel, is the true picture of ahimsa or non-violence in the present world. Thus, the canvas of the novel is vast-sweeping from the city of Akbarabad to the city of Bombay to an island called America; from jails to violence to diplomatic banquets and to New York nightclubs and to the Second World War; all there the theme of violence and oppression and their impact foregrounds the novel.

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