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4. Obsession and Man-Woman Relationship in Mistaken Identity

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Nayantara Sahgal's novel Mistaken Identity is about Bhushan's thwarted passion for the Muslim girl, Razia and the meaning of Indian identity. It is also an attempt on the part of Sahagal to move mankind towards a brotherhood which will be achieved by letting the burden of history. It highlights the importance of mutual trust and communication in man-woman relationship in order to maintain secular tradition.

Keywords: obsession, mistaken identity, man-woman relationship,freedom , culture

Nayantara Sahgal, recipient of the Sinclair Prize for fiction, the Sahitya Akademi Award, and the Commonwealth Writers Award, is an Indian novelist and political commentator who has significant contributions to Indian English literature. Her novel *Mistaken Identity* (1988*)* is a story of Bhushan Singh, the purposeless but amiable son of a minor Raja of Vijaygarh, a small taluk in Northern India, is arrested on his train journey home to North India, mistakenly charged with treason, and thrown into jail. As the months of awaiting trial stretch into years, the apolitical Bhushan entertains his communist cell-mates with tales of his world; of his veiled and idiosyncratic mother; of his very modern Parsee girlfriend who wears dresses; of the American flapper who taught him the Turkey Trot; of his forbidden boyhood affair which sparked off two murderous Hindu-Moslem riots and led to his banishment abroad. It is at once a family saga, a romance, a rich historical novel, and a fable concerning the implacable working of karma. The novel explores the theme of love and obsession and the meaning of Indian identity. It is also an attempt on the part of Sahagal to move mankind towards a brotherhood which will be achieved by letting the burden of history. It highlights the importance of mutual trust and communication in man-woman relationship.

The ironic dimension of the novel acts as a counterweight to the emergence of an ideology. It is perhaps, on one level a wishful response to India's present social and political situation, distanced to a time of decision a time when the tensions and cross-currents of occupied India were beginning to flow one way, towards the ending of the British Raj. V.S. Naipaul sees the whole period from the Indian Mutiny to the present day as being the historical period when:

The idea of freedom has gone everywhere in India... People everywhere have ideas of who they are and what they are themselves..... The liberation of the spirit that has come to India could not come as release alone. In India, with its layer below layer of distress and cruelty, it had to come as disturbance. It had to come as range and revolt. India was a country of a million little mutinies. (517-18).

The novel *Mistaken Identity* confirms Sahgal's central observation. The rebellion of Bhushan's mother, while fantastic in its apparent suddenness, nevertheless symbolizes the way in which subterranean stresses can erupt into unexpected action. The narrator, Bhushan known as Jumbo takes the reader and cell-mates back to the home of his youth, abroad to America through his own tales to pass time before trial. He is suffering from his own suppressed past which contains violence, including murder, all directly linked with his thwarted passion for the Muslim girl, Razia. The novel, therefore, is centrally about the repressed and unacknowledged self-the true source of "mistaken identity". Even at the end of the novel, when Jumbo is commenting on the meaning of his narrative, he is not free of self-deception:

Many married years later, whenever she and I went back to our beginning to discover what it was that had attracted us to each other, we got it all wrong. My wife insisted she saw a political commitment writ large on my face. I, on my part, said I'd never been able to resist a woman's beauty, or the culture of Islam. The truth is, her heart went out to a frightened poet, and mine was bewitched by a sign of the times. (205)

Throughout the novel Jumbo has denied he is political possibly because his view of "political" is too narrow. More centrally, he is afraid of resists-commitment, possibly because his one blinding passion- Razia had plunged him into a nightmare where "I thought I must be going mad myself, for my eyes were his eyes.... I could not tell where he left off and I began" (200). The person he is identifying with, his former servant, had committed murder in a rage of jealousy: in parallel circumstances so had Jumbo. At this point of the novel, Jumbo reaches the depths, "not knowing how to bear the pain of what I'd done." Sheltering behind the guise of a retiring poet, he chooses to deny his nature. While every shred of feeling pulls him as apolitical activist towards one great cause of achieving Hindu-Muslim unity.

Only through exposure to his cell-mates during the political trial which forms the back-bone of the novel does he come to develop a respect for the trade unionists and communists-the strange assorted group of co-defendants. When they sing protest songs in support of the Salt March, "I join in self-consciously at first. Oddly enough I've never raised my voice to this pitch before, or in unison with other people, and it takes getting used to. But it's an alchemizing

experience" (110). However, he immediately questions the process of purification he is undergoing by undercutting his words "It's a positive improvement on counting sheep."

The ironic reflexiveness of the novel is made even more complex by the way Sahgal manipulates time within it. The narrative begins in Bombay with Bhushan (Jumbo) returning from a trip to America. At Hotel Taj Sylla comes to collect a book he has brought for her from America. She requests him to extend his stay to give his performance. He delays in Bombay to oblige Sylla, a Parsee friend with whom he shares 'a tender close companionship' and occasional lover, by performing a small part in her modernized version of *The Scarlet Letter*. At the end of the first performance, he leaves abruptly, intending to return to his home, Vijaygarh, pointedly linking his disappearance with "Hester's husband". His reason for leaving, and the point of his allusion to *The Scarlet Letter* is revealed in pieces throughout the novel, through a series of psychologically driven flashbacks.

Bhushan's arrest and imprisonment while on the train to Vijaygarh is the driving force behind his reluctant review of his past. Apparently mistaken for a conspirator against the King Emperor of India, he is goaded alongside three trade unionists and an assortment of communists. His quasi-aristocratic social background-- his father is a minor raja who is petitioning for hereditary title-separates him from his cell-mates who decide to explore his life as a case-study. Thus, he begins with a structured reason for returning to the beginning and setting the scene for his life. In time, the process takes over, and the unresolved conflicts of his young adulthood, receive closer if reluctant scrutiny, with the most painful moments delayed until near the close. Part of the consequence of this process is that two kinds of search are being related at once-a search for facts in past time, and a search for meaning in present time. It is through mistaking the process that Malashri Lal has been betrayed into writing. "However, Bhushan in prison, still yearns for Razia, and is determined to trace her, claim her, with every resource at his command (285)."

In fact, at this point he knows she is happily married to a wealthy Turk-it is this discovery that sent him fleeing in panic and despair from Bombay after an accidental meeting in the Taj Hotel. He simply delays recalling the fact until page 179. The process of delay is, of course, psychological. Jasbir Jain in her book *Goodbye to Realism: the Ending of Mistaken Identity* accounts Bhushan's coming to a kind of self-knowledge. "The hidden unconscious desires, earlier forgotten or half-remembered experiences resurrect themselves as ghosts and crowd his consciousness... This is the period when he realized there is no single way of looking at a situation, that reality is multi-dimensional, the concept of sanity a relative one. His boyhood

escapades catch up with him....." But even Ms Jain fails to mention that the death of the imbecile- Razia's supposed husband- is caused by the stabbing of a razor- sharp pen-knife into his side by the distraught Jumbo-- same escapade!

Jumbo's action in murdering the "idiot" is part of a carefully constructed historical context of Hindu-Muslim rivalry, which receives multi-dimensional treatment throughout the work. As mentioned, Jumbo's youthful affair with Razia, a Muslim girl, has violent repercussions till at the time and later. It is presented as part of a violent history which should be transcended. Their trysting place is "... where our forefathers had blood thirstily tangled and where solder ants commemorated the slaughter by shredding live caterpillars and devouring them" (65). To defuse that history partly of its Indian content is presented in part through associated histories of struggle and revolt, especially in Turkey and Russia.

For Jumbo, the end of the Khilafat, and the success of Mustafa Kemal Pasha represents the best model of reformation and modernization of Islam. The imprisonment of the Tzar and subsequent executions are seen as loss of humanity, despite the ambiguous opportunity for liberation of repressed class. The movement is well supported by Hindu and Muslim to sweep aside dogma and ritual observance and move towards recognition of each other’s humanity. The revolutionaries ironically undercut their own discourse by illustrating deep human emotions giving rise to humanity.

This system of *purdah* has almost entirely disappeared in India, except among some orthodox Muslims. However, vestiges, some still powerful, of a system which had the effect of denying women's rights, still appear in Indian society. References in the novel to extreme measures taken by a police inspector to limit the number of female children in his family, point to the reality that there are still serious examples of the denial of women's rights to life and liberty within Indian society. At one point Comrade Dey says, "Capitalists have a word sense of proportion" (166).

However, when one considers Sylla's pandering to a half-dead dog as one would hesitate to treat a baby; or more importantly, look at the fantastic kinds of evidence placed before the conspiracy trial, and the power of fear to distort its value and give meaning to the meaninglessness; or again when one examines the opinions and values of the oppressors in the novel, what is most apparent is just that-their weird sense of proportion.

Whatever is placed in the foreground tends to dominate, whether it deserves to or not. People fear what does not exist. They seem to justify actions and attitudes in terms of events hundreds of years in the past. Violence is used against those who are not foes at all-only

imagined to be. Politics, then, is a matter of a chosen perspective. In this novel no ideology or system of values is found to meet the real needs of humanity. Communism fails in so far as it reduces men and women to machines. Capitalism fails because it deifies career and financial power; religions fail when they become obsessed with their own institutional survival rather than with meeting real human need. Fascism is dismissed outright. Only inspired and humane leadership, such as is said to have been offered by Mustafa Kemal Pasha, whose achievement was to reform religion in 'tune' with contemporary social reality.

The other two major political alternatives are even more quickly dismissed. America is presented as a land of unlimited opportunity that threatens to soften the brain. There sex is for physical health, and the quantity of money is clearly more important than its source. Willy-May, the devotee of sex and fitness proves the point when she runs off to marry Al Capone's henchman. Fascism is dismissed with the briefest ironical note as "a straw in the breeze" (54).

Political ideologies and religious dogmas are equally flawed, for they fail to take into account human identity and need. Sometimes through imposition, sometimes by a form of choice, sometimes as a result of personal fate, we put on or assume idealities which not only deceive others but also deceive ourselves. As Jasbir Jain has pointed out, there is a network of mistaken identities in the novel. Her tracing of these is thorough but not complete, but it would be tedious to bring all the kinds of "Mistaken identities" to notice. The central point is that, owing to the power of dogma, gender, class and caste to shape and dominate lives, that failure in self-knowledge and knowledge of others is bound to be endemic. We see each other and ourselves first as belonging to a group, as owing allegiance to a creed or a code, which in proportion as it is binding and rigid, causes division and separation between individuals, and repression of the inner nature within individuals. It may be argued that people can only know themselves in terms of social structures and relations. Nayantara Sahgal has demonstrated in detail the ways in which social relations, which have the apparent support of ideology can ossify and become repressive - a denial of one's human nature.

The deepest marks of such demarcations may be observed in sex-roles which, rather than dividing Hindu from Muslim, tended to lump them together. The *purdah* system in the 1920s, Sahgal portrays as belonging to both cultures. Of his mother's apartment Bhushan writes: "High walls blocked it off from the rest of the sprawling mansion, and every house, all over the estate, Hindu or Muslim, was divided into male and female (36).

Perhaps we can say, when past formulations are preserved and enforced in a social and political climate where they are no longer appropriate, that proportion will be lost, that the flow

of the life spirit will be prevented, that the opportunity for self- realization will be denied. I know what I have just said fails to do justice to the novel's significance. However, the ironic shifts are designed to encourage questioning, to promote the development of a human family, to disperse fear and ignorance.

The novel is about obsession at one level, the obsession with freedom that made Indians commit their lives to violent or nonviolent resistance to British rule at one level, Bhushan Singh's obsession with the search for his lost love, Razia at other level. This is an obsessive besotted longing of the kind that mystics have for god, and more rarely men and woman for each other. The heart of the story is the meaning about the Indian Identity in this country, where cultures criss-crossed and blood streams have mingled, there is no such thing as racial purity or an exclusive identity traceable to a single source. In Bhushan Singh the Hindu and Muslim traditions combined as an inseparable joint inheritance. The novelist Nayanatara Sahgal is deeply committed to modern India's secular tradition. She weaves a beautiful and realistic fabric of man-woman relationship in a subtle manner.

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