

**Exploring Marxian thought in Nayantara Sahgal's *When The Moon Shines*  
*By Day* and *The Fate Of Butterflies***

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**Abstract:**

Nayantara Sahgal is an eminent Indian English novelist who has been writing fiction and non-fiction for the past seven decades. She hails from a political family and her works deal with political conflicts and social issues. She has written eleven novels and the researcher has chosen two novels for this research paper. *When The Moon Shines* by Day and *The Fate of Butterflies* were published in 2017 and 2019 respectively. Nayantara Sahgal wrote these novels to critique the rise of right-wing fundamentalism in India. She has written about the challenges it poses to the multicultural and polyethnic society of India. In these novels, she discusses about various political ideologies like Gandhism and Nazism. The researcher plans to focus on her views on Marxism. She has written about the relevance of Marxian thought in 21<sup>st</sup> century. The characters in the novels discuss about communism and revolution. In this research paper, the researcher plans to explore the relevance of Marxian thought in the 21<sup>st</sup> century political landscape.

**Keywords:** Right-wing fundamentalism, multicultural, political ideologies, Marxism, Communism, relevance

**Introduction:**

Nayantara Sahgal was born in May 10,1927 to Ranjit Sitaram Pandit and Vijayalakshmi Pandit. Her mother was the younger sister to India's first prime minister Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru. Born and brought up in a political family, she was influenced by Mahatma Gandhi's principles of *Ahimsa* and *Satyagraha*. In her autobiography *Prison and*

*Chocolate Cake*, she writes

With us political awareness was a gradual and unconscious process and the most important influence in our lives. We were born and grew up at a time when India had come under the leadership of Gandhi and was maturing to nationhood under his guidance. My sisters and I were among the youngest of India's children to be touched by the spark with which Gandhi illumined our country (17, Sahgal)

Since she was influenced by politics at a young age, she was able to incorporate political themes and ideologies in her novels. She was also influenced by Marxism and communism.

In one of the chapters in her autobiography, she mentions about a letter written to her by her father. Her father was also a communist sympathizer. Ranjit Sitaram Pandit writes in the letter "I have chosen the time of the Moscow broadcast in English, so that I can hear of the collective farming of the Soviets and ply the charkha (Spinning wheel) of Gandhi Baba" (35, Sahgal). This shows that Marxian thought had an early influence in the life of Nayantara Sahgal.

**Marxian thought in *When The Moon Shines By Day*:**

The novel, published in 2017 deals with the danger of right-wing fundamentalism in Indian society. Nayantara Sahgal was personally affected by the murder of rationalists like Narendra Dabholkar, Govind Pansare, M.M.Kalburgi and Gauri Lankesh. She chose to write the novel as a means of protest. She attacks right-wing ideology in the novel by referring to Adolf Hitler. She writes "Franz who was famous for satirizing the Fuhrer and his kind-made Kamlesh smile" (17, *When The Moon Shines By Day*). Franz is a writer who cautions others about the rise of fascism. He is from Germany and he states that what happened in Germany might happen in India too.

A particular incident in the novel highlights the animosity between right-wing and left-wing ideologies. Cyrus Batlivala owns an art gallery and his art gallery is attacked by right-wing activists because the paintings are done by communists. In the novel, Sahgal writes "It had come to the notice of those men that the painters were communists but they should have asked Mr.Batlivala not to hold the exhibition, then this would not have happened" (90, Sahgal). The DCT, an anonymous character in the novel is a right-wing sympathizer and he justifies the actions of the vandalizers indirectly. Nayantara Sahgal not only sympathizes with left-wing ideology, she also pinpoints the shortcomings of communism. In one of the extracts from the novel, she writes "Has Lenin's revolution been bloodied and betrayed beyond repair by Stalin Art is no reclusive ivory tower. It is

passionate and political. In a struggle it takes sides" (96, Sahgal).

She highlights that communism too had its dark chapters in history. Carlos is another character in the novel who represents the Marxist perspective. He is a Cuban ambassador and he organizes a party to celebrate Fidel's survival of the CIA's forty-fifth attempt to assassinate him. Nayantara Sahgal pinpoints the evils of right-wing fundamentalism by contrasting it with Marxist tenets. She criticizes Nazi Germany, Capitalist USA and other autocratic states and aligns herself and her characters in the novels with Gandhism and Marxism.

### **Marxian thought in *The Fate Of Butterflies*:**

After 1991, India entered into the era of Liberalization, Privatization and Globalization. Many multinational companies entered the Indian market and flooded their products. This also affected the consumer behavior and the cultural pattern of Indians. Irrespective of the global exposure, caste hierarchy and class distinction prevailed in the Indian society. The Fate of Butterflies published in 2019 offers a critique of 21<sup>st</sup> century India with its paradoxical political landscape. In this novel, Nayantara Sahgal also intersects class with caste, ideology, religion and gender.

Sergei is a character in the novel who hails from Russia. By portraying the points of view of Sergei, Nayantara Sahgal presents her Marxist perspectives. For example, she writes "He was reminded of his father's bleak joke from Soviet times, with one nervous apparatchik asking another, 'Let me know Who's still Who.'" (11, Sahgal). Dimitri is another Russian in the novel who recollects the political events that took place in Indonesia. Dimitri says in the novel "The new regime under Suharto swung into action right away disposing of Communists" (12, Sahgal). The political context underlying the upheaval is also explained by Sahgal. Dimitri further states that many stakeholders had profited from the communist bloodbath. He adds "It had earned Suharto America's pleasure and brought billions of dollars into Indonesia's petroleum industry" (13, Sahgal). This shows that Sahgal sympathizes with the communist ideology and criticizes the capitalist greed of the USA.

She also introspects the reasons for the failure of communism. She blames Stalin for the purges and trials in Soviet Union. She reiterates the fact that Marxism is a grand vision but failed due to poor implementation. She writes "If the grandeur of Lenin's vision had been so treacherously and blithely sabotaged, if Trotsky, its last surviving hope, was later hunted and murdered in far-off Mexico, then what chance had any dream, or the dreamer, of survival?" (14, Sahgal). Though the novel is set in India, Sahgal writes about

Communist Russia and its past. This explicates the left leaning tendency of the author. Sergei's daughter Irina is a political activist and she criticizes America for its capitalist overreach. Sahgal writes "How could you? After they invaded Iraq for oil, they had no right to, and Vietnam before that and the atom bomb before that. And the gun lobby in full swing over there." (25, Sahgal). Nayantara Sahgal vociferously questions the economic imperialism imposed by the USA on other developing nations. On the other hand, she nostalgically dreams of the future that communism offered for the entire world.

Nayantara Sahgal also posits that England's colonization of India was a rapacious plunder. She argues that all over the world there is an uprise of right-wing ideology. She mentions Slovakia as an example. She writes "In Slovakia the hour of fascist revival is already here" (43, Sahgal). Mirajkar is a rightist thinker in the novel and he tries to convince Prabhakar to join the policy think tank. He says "I understand. And we need our best minds in the universities to purge them of Communist and other atheist teachings". (47, Sahgal). Sahgal argues that right-wing fundamentalists don't encourage freedom of speech and expression and believe in purging their opponents.

Sahgal also recounts the childhood of Prabhakar, the protagonist whose parents worked for eleven hours per day. The eight-hour day work schedule became possible only because of the Marxian thought and communist revolution. In the novel, there is an intersection between class and race. A member of the Voice of Hindu Americans says that "There is such a thing as a racial hierarchy and we belong at the top, to the Indo-European racial category" (121, Sahgal). Capitalism, race and caste intersect to create a system of modern exploitation in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Nayantara Sahgal makes an overt statement in support of communism in the novel. She expresses her point of view through Prabhakar in the following statement "There were times when Prabhakar, who was not a Communist, wished he was. This was one of them. He hoped Communism had a future" (123, Sahgal). In another conversation between the characters, Sahgal writes "Was she looking forward to a communist future?" (128, Sahgal)

### **Conclusion:**

Nayantara Sahgal has consistently projected Marxian thought and communist ideals in her novels through her characters. In many of her earlier novels, she has covertly discussed the tenets of socialism and Marxism. In the later novels especially in the novels mentioned above, she has taken a bold political stand by arguing in favor of communism. She states that whenever a political ideology dominates the world and suppresses the people, the opposite ideology establishes itself as a reaction. She justifies this stand in the

novel by writing "His political mind told him that when there is one extreme, as there is here, you have to swing all the way to the other extreme before coming back to an ideal space in the middle" (128, Sahgal). She posits that left wing politics might gain its ground in 21<sup>st</sup> century as a reaction to class exploitation and economic imperialism.

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