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Postcolonial Alienation and the Construction of Self in Nayantara Sahgal's Mistaken Identity

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Abstract

Nayantara Sahgal's *Mistaken Identity*, published in 1988, digs into what it means to figure out who you are in the middle of colonial rule in 1920s India. Through Bhushan Singh a small-time prince who grows up with Western values but feels cut off from his own culture and politics Sahgal gets right to the confusion that colonized people carry. Bhushan's wrongful arrest isn't just a plot twist; it's a sharp metaphor. The whole idea of "mistaken identity" shows how colonizers used stereotypes and whatever suited them politically to keep people in boxes and hold on to power. This paper looks at how "mistaken identity" takes on big questions like how colonial rule wipes out individuality, how people lose their sense of self when they're cut off from their culture, and the push-and-pull between old social orders and the rise of nationalism in India before independence. Sahgal doesn't just lay it all out; she uses irony and keeps a certain distance in the storytelling, almost poking fun at both the absurdities of British rule and the ways locals go along with it. The main character barely acts at all, which says a lot it's a quiet criticism of the elite, who just stand by instead of really getting involved in the movement for freedom. Gender isn't pushed to the side lines, either. The novel digs into how patriarchy sticks around, even when everyone's shouting about change and reform. There's a lot going on under the surface. The story's structure itself makes you notice how identity gets forced on people from the outside, not something they discover for themselves. In the end, *Mistaken Identity* refuses to let you see the world as just colonizer versus colonized. Instead, it shows how messy real life is people constantly struggling to figure out where they stand, who they are, and what they really want.

Key words: *Colonizer, Colonized, Mistaken identity and Gender dynamics*

Introduction

Nayantara Sahgal is a distinct voice in Indian English fiction since she narrates political consciousness, self-doubt, and the experiences of women in a nation that is eradicating colonialism. The novel *Mistaken Identity*, published in 1988, actually weaves all of these strands together. Sahgal sets the book in the 1920s, when India is struggling towards independence. The tale is of Bhushan Singh, a small prince from a tiny state who suddenly finds himself in prison and branded a political revolutionary, yet he cares not a whit for politics. This twist, this confusion, is something more than a plot device. With Bhushan's bewilderment and the dreamlike conditions of his detention, Sahgal reveals not just the literal "mistaken identity" of her hero but also the larger metaphoric misunderstandings that pervaded the colonial encounter between the British masters and their Indian subjects. The title *Mistaken Identity* therefore functions on several levels: it alludes to Bhushan's individual dilemma, to the more general misrecognition of Indian nationalism and culture by colonial powers, and to the psychic dislocation of Indians who were educated in Western ideals but disconnected from their own culture. Bhushan personifies this inner turmoil he is a beneficiary of colonial education and privilege, but he does not have a sense of place or mission. His detached passivity from political and cultural reality reflects the wider problem of the Indian

elite, suspended between two worlds and unsure of their position in a changing world. Sahgal's humour and irony are yet another dimension in which she deepens the political and philosophical satire of the novel. The ridiculousness of the situation in which a man is punished for a revolution he does not comprehend or endorse is exploited as a device of satire ridiculing the inefficiency and ignorance of colonial rule, and the emptiness of princely mores that adhered to antiquated ideas of status and power. The tone of the narrative veers between comedy and pathos, capturing the contradictions of a society in flux. Bhushan's incarceration ironically becomes a space of discovery, compelling him and, by association, the reader to grapple with matters of selfhood, liberty, and accountability.

Finally, *Mistaken Identity* is not so much a novel about the wrongful arrest of one man but an allegory for a nation attempting to determine itself in the face of colonial imperialism and internal deterioration. With humour, irony, and understated political irony, Nayantara Sahgal lays bare the vulnerability of both imperial and conventional power, yet reveals the desperate necessity for self-knowledge and moral strength in the midst of historical turmoil. The novel's humour does not weaken its seriousness but is instead a way of exposing the tragic absurdity of a world run on mistaken ideas where colonizer and colonized are both prisoners of their own illusions of identity.

Identity in Conflict: The Postcolonial Subject

In *Mistaken Identity*, Nayantara Sahgal introduces Bhushan Singh as a symbolic character torn between a cultural and political tug-of-war. As a Western-educated Indian prince, Bhushan is the embodied hybrid identity conceived by Homi K. Bhabha in the sense that such characters are "almost the same, but not quite" (Bhabha 89). Bhushan's English gentlemanly manners and apolitical demeanor make him alien to the nationalist zeal emerging around him. His Western education and upbringing in British institutions alienate him not just from conservative Indian society but also from his own identity. He is indecisive, passive, and apolitically at a moment when the nation is experiencing a political earthquake. Sahgal employs Bhushan's cultural dislocation to illustrate how education systems under colonial rule were intended to produce empire-loyal subjects but rootless in their histories and traditions. Sahgal's depiction of Bhushan's alienation serves also to reveal the psychological effects of this hybrid identity. Educated in British schools and trained to internalize Western conceptions of civility and rule, Bhushan is driven away from the rhythms, values, and desires of classical Indian society. His failure or refusal to join the nationalist movement demonstrates the moral and emotional numbing

brought on by colonial conditioning. Bhushan's passivity is not personal frailty; it is a symptom of a greater historical sickness that had beset the colonized elite men who had learned the language and manners of empire but lost their organic relation with their people and culture.

Ironically, Bhushan's political indifference is juxtaposed with the tumultuous times in which he lives the 1920s, a period of mass awakening and anti-colonial struggle. While the nation surrounding him hums with revolutionary fervor, Bhushan is stuck in an identity crisis, unclear about his role or loyalty. His erroneous arrest and confinement are thus a symbolic reversal: the least political of men is caught up in politics by happenstance, implying that with colonial occupation, even apoliticism could not protect one from the political facts of domination.

Sahgal employs Bhushan's disorientation and displacement as a powerful critique of the success of the colonial project in producing subjects. And yet, as Sahgal demonstrates, such subjects were not entirely English or truly Indian they lived in a state of liminality, forever unsure of where they belonged. By irony and understated satire, Sahgal attacks the psychological violence of colonialism, which not only controlled the body but disfigured the mind. Bhushan's mistaken identity is then more than just a device for plotting, but a metaphor for the dislocated consciousness of the colonized self, torn between crosscurrents of empire, tradition, and the quest for authentic identity.

Colonial Power and Misrecognition

Bhushan's wrongful arrest for revolutionary activities, despite having no connection to politics, is a central irony in the novel. It dramatizes how colonial systems operate on presumption, racial profiling, and control rather than justice or truth. Bhushan is not seen for who he is but for what he is assumed to represent: a threat to imperial authority. This case of mistaken identity becomes a metaphor for the broader colonial experience, in which individuality is erased and identity is imposed from above. Sahgal critiques this erasure by portraying Bhushan as a man bewildered not only by his arrest but by his entire place in society. He is a victim not just of wrongful imprisonment, but of the deeper systemic misrecognition that characterizes colonial power. Bhushan's illegal arrest for revolutionary activity, even though he has no interest whatsoever in politics, is the underlying irony of mistaken identity. This incident compellingly conveys Sahgal's critique of colonial rule, which operates not by truth or justice but by presumption, prejudice, and institutional control. The British colonial apparatus, as Sahgal portrays it, is one of suspicion, not understanding; it frames "revolutionaries" and "criminals" by stereotype and fear, not fact. Bhushan is therefore guilty, not for what he has done, but for what the colonial

regime suspects him to embody a perceived threat to imperial order simply by reason of his class, his education, and his Indianness. Thus, his false imprisonment becomes representative of the general failure of the colonial regime to acknowledge the complexity and individuality of its subjects.

By this scenario, Sahgal reveals the dehumanizing process of colonialism that turns the subject of the colony into a category a faceless entity in the imperial imagination. Bhushan's self is overwritten by the colonial discursive framework; he becomes, in practice, a tabula rasa onto which the British authorities impose their fears of revolt and chaos. The "error" of his identity is thus not a misfortune but a structure, explaining how the colonial gaze works through misrecognition. Sahgal's decision to base the novel on such a misunderstanding shifts the narrative into a stinging allegory of empire, where vision is warped by power and reality is always filtered through prejudice. Bhushan's confusion at his arrest reflects a deeper existential confusion. His confusion about why he has been jailed reflects his larger disorientation in a society experiencing huge political and cultural transformation. The absurdity of his circumstance a man who is apolitical but labeled as revolutionary compels readers to see the absurdity of the colonial condition more generally, in which reason is abandoned and ideology prevails, with justice secondary to control. In portraying Bhushan as literal and figurative victim of "misidentificatory crime," Sahgal criticizes not only the indiscriminate brutality of imperial power but also brings to the fore the psychological costs of existence under perpetual surveillance and misnaming.

Bhushan's imprisonment ultimately serves to symbolize the imprisonment of a whole people within the strictures of colonial discourse. The British administrators, in their failure to see Indians as individuals, reaffirm a system of externally imposed identity over internally realized one. Sahgal's presentation of Bhushan as bewildered, passive, and estranged is therefore a powerful critique of the moral and intellectual ruin that colonial rule has caused. His tale is not merely one of bureaucratic wrong, but of epistemic violence, the destruction of self through the authority to define others. To that extent, *Mistaken Identity* takes a farcical misrecognition and turns it into an extremely politicized intervention about the character of colonial power, its blindness, and its inability to perceive the humanity of the people over whom it exercises power.

Tradition and the Irrelevance of the Feudal Elite

Bhushan's status as a small prince in *Mistaken Identity* is a critical aspect of his identity crisis. As the son of the tiny princely state of Vijaygarh, he is a member of a class whose power originated in tradition, family name, and royal privilege. But by

the 1920s, this world of princes and palaces was fast declining. The princely states were merely "semi-independent," still ruled by the British though they seemed to govern themselves. Their leaders had no actual authority and subsisted on British patronage. Sahgal situates Bhushan in this environment in order to demonstrate how insecure and unstable such power had become. His royal rank provides him with status, but without meaning or purpose in a rapidly evolving India. Sahgal examines this royal class with irony and criticism. In Bhushan's household, politics is regarded as something uncouth and below royal dignity. His household likes to remain within its palace, engaged in rituals and tradition that have no actual significance anymore. This isolation from political life keeps them away from the spirit of freedom permeating the nation. Their arrogant traditions now appear out dated and hollow in an era when common Indians are struggling for freedom. Sahgal's description of this detachment indicates how the former social order had lost its meaning. The royal families, not ready to evolve or comprehend the new India, become emblems of a world that is eventually gone.

Conclusion

Mistaken Identity by Nayantara Sahgal provides a rich analysis of the intricacies of identity during the colonial period. In the life of Bhushan Singh, the novel grasps the disorientation of a colonized upper class suspended between declining traditions and rising nationalist movements. Not only is Sahgal critiquing the British imperial power, she is questioning also the social hierarchies and contradictions in Indian society itself. Using irony and symbolism, she offers a sophisticated analysis of the ways in which identity is formed, misread, and contested within the empire's context. This novel exposes how colonialism does not just rule political systems but also intrudes on the inner life of humans, warping their self-perception. Bhushan's estrangement from both his heritage and freedom struggle highlights the alienation experienced by most of the princely class. Sahgal also indicates the gendered aspects of this crisis, highlighting the silencing of women's voices within both colonial and nationalist ideologies. The title itself points to an underlying philosophical question whether identity is ever permanent or simply a result of outside perception. In doing this, *Mistaken Identity* is a strong critique of the fluid, frequently fractured nature of identity under imperial rule.

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