



**Epitome : International Journal  
of Multidisciplinary Research**

**ISSN : 2395-6968**

***Comprehending India through the Novels of Nyantara Sahgal  
and Kota Neelima***

**Dr. Shivaji D. Sargar**

Professor of English & Director  
Centre for Distance and Online Education.  
University of Mumbai, Mumbai.

&

**‘Mrs. Deepti Mandlik**

Ph. D Research Scholar, Department of English,  
University of Mumbai, Mumbai.

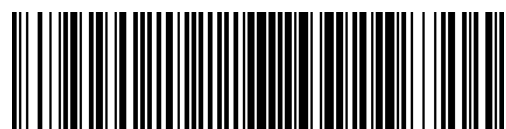
**ABSTRACT:**

*Indian writing in English has been one of the most pivotal pillars of the worldwide literature. Presenting the nation on the global platform, it highlights everything that makes India, India, including its culture, history, geographical specialities, socio-political dynamics, traditions, and customs. Indian female writers writing in English, with their rich and comprehensive contribution added to the existing literary body depth and glory.*

*Majorly dealing with gender identity, gender disparity, quest for identity and identity crisis, the Indian female writers writing in English also touched upon the socio-political realities of the time. The colonial rule, the independence*

*movements, the post-independence phase, the transition of the country, everything is best captured and immortalised in their writing. Complementing to the words of Scottish philosopher Thomas Carlyle, ‘In Books, we find the soul of a nation’, literature by female contributors like Kamala Markandeya, Nayantara Sahgal, Kota Neelima presented the nation as it was and as it is through their pens. This paper attempts to view the nation through the writings of Nayantara Sahgal and Kota Neelima.*

*Key words: pivotal, socio-political dynamics, comprehensive contribution, gender identity, gender disparity, quest, identity crisis, colonial rule, independence movement, transition.*



ISSN : 2395-6968

Nayantara Sahgal and Kota Neelima, both sensible and sensitive writers presenting the country in their writing ensured to present the real picture of it without biases, glorification or under exposure.

### **Bio-Literary Sketches of Nayantara Sahgal and Kota Neelima:**

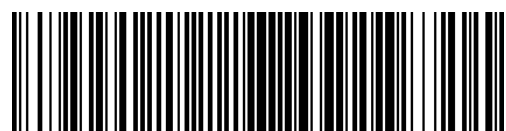
Nayantara Sahgal, a distinguished novelist, journalist, and political commentator, is one of the revered names in Indian literature. A recipient of the Sahitya Akademi Award (1986) for *Rich Like Us*, that she returned in 2015, as a protest to the murders of Indian intelligentsia, she is best known for her incisive portrayal of India's political and social landscape.

Born on May 10, 1927, into an influential political family, Sahgal had firsthand exposure to India's freedom struggle. Her mother, Vijayalakshmi Pandit, was a prominent freedom fighter, India's first ambassador to the UN, and a key figure in the Constituent Assembly. Her father, Ranjit Sitaram Pandit, was a lawyer, writer, and nationalist. Her uncle, Jawaharlal Nehru, became independent India's first Prime Minister, and her cousin, Indira Gandhi, served as the nation's third Prime Minister. Such political family background has unmistakably shaped her writing.

Despite the roller-coaster childhood due to her family's political involvement, Sahgal completed her education at Woodstock School (1943) and later earned a B.A. from Wellesley College (1947). She held fellowships at Radcliffe Institute, Woodrow Wilson International Center, and the National Humanities Center. Recognized globally, she was elected a Foreign Honorary Fellow in 1990 and received awards such as the Sinclair Prize (1985) and the Commonwealth Writers' Prize (1987).

Sahgal's literary contributions span novels, memoirs, and political commentaries. Her notable works include *Storm in Chandigarh* (1969), *Storm in Chandigarh* (1977), *Mistaken Identity* (1988), and *The Fate of Butterflies* (2019). A bold voice in Indian literature, she continues to champion political truth and social justice through her writings.

Kota Neelima (1971) the multi-dimensional personality, an author, researcher, political commentator, artist and now a political leader from Telangana, presents her political concerns powerfully in the context of globalization. She is among the new promising writers who write sensibly, not to criticize the prevalent system but to change it. The agrarian crisis is one of the focal issues Kota Neelima deals with. Her notable non-fictional work '*Widows of Vidarbha*' is based on her extensive research and interviews of the farm widows of Vidarbha, one of the regions of Maharashtra that witnessed numerous suicides of the farmers. This work, along



with presenting the realities of farmers' lives accentuate the gender politics that affected the lives of farm widows.

Kota Neelima, as the distinguished journalist, political analyst, and author, has made significant contributions to Indian political discourse and literature. Born on January 5, 1969, in Vijayawada, Andhra Pradesh, she was raised in Delhi in a family of intellectuals—her father, the late K.V.S. Rama Sarma, was a journalist and author. She holds a Master's in International Relations from Jawaharlal Nehru University and a Ph.D. in Political Science from the University of Delhi. Additionally, she is trained in fine arts under renowned painter Arpana Caur and was a Senior Research Fellow in South Asian Studies at Johns Hopkins University.

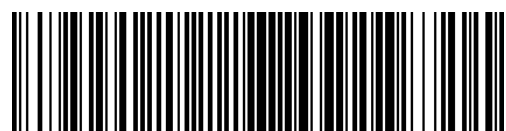
With over two decades of experience in political journalism, Neelima has worked as Chief Correspondent for The Indian Express and Political Editor of The Sunday Guardian. She continues to contribute to leading publications such as The Economic and Political Weekly, Hindustan Times, and The Wire. A keen observer of contemporary politics, she also served as General Secretary of the Telangana Pradesh Congress Committee and contested from Sanathnagar in the Telangana Assembly elections.

An active voice at major literary festivals, Neelima's writing focuses on agrarian distress, rural struggles, and gender inequality in post-independence India, shedding light on critical socio-political issues.

### **The writings:**

While Nayantara Sahgal's literary world is the urban world of the elite classes, the bourgeois, the have class of the society, Neelima presents the unattended and unheard world of the rural India, the world of agriculture and farmers mainly. Most of the novels of Nayantara are set on the cities like Delhi, Chandigarh and the characters are foreign returned, well-educated, with no financial pressures at personal level. They are commonly industrialists, mill owners, ICS officers, academicians, apolitical personas like the CMs, the PM, the Home Minister etc. the affluents of the society as they are, they are seen to be commonly affected by the socio-political upheaval around them.

Nayantara Sahgal, being the witness of the transitional phase of the nation, has viewed the pre and the post -independence problems of the country so closely. The national partition of 1947 and the national emergency are some of the recurrent themes of her writing. Most of her works, for instance, *Strom in Chandigarh*, *A Situation in New Delhi*, *Rich Like Us* have the



references of the partition. She portrays a generation of partition affected individuals in most of her works. It is her *Rich Like US*, that thematises the national emergency that continued from 1975 and 1977. The nation she portrays is that in the phase of transition. The nation, still not able to stand independently, but stumbling. For instance, the India in Nayantara's *A Situation in New Delhi* is portrayed to be undergoing the uncertainty and instability after the demise of its Prime Minister, Shivraj, the character modelled after India's first prime minister Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru. Her *Storm in Chandigarh* backgrounds the formation of states by divisions. Haryana, the state formed after division on Punjab on linguistic ground. The formation of state brought into its wake unrest, hatred and chaos. Nayantara, by capturing it, underlines the reality of independent India. The characters delineated in the novels are caught in the dilemma, the dilemma of the traditionality and the modernity. For instance, it is Ram in *Rich Like Us*, has been married to Mona and has a son, Dev. Nevertheless, he brings from London his new love and wife, Rose. Despite Rose's insistence, he could not abandon Mona, for he could not take a single stand.

The elite class of the society that Nayantara pictures, values marriage, though at superficial level. Being in the wedlock, they exasperate. Lack of emotion connect, and empathy, inability to understand the emotional needs of the partners create gap in the relationship. Yet, they suffer but stay together. Ram, Rose and Mona in *Rich Like Us*, Inder and Saroj, Mara and Jeet, Vishal and Leela in *Storm in Chandigarh*, Usman Ali and his wife Nadira in *A Situation in New Delhi* are the couples with no compatibility. They find comfort outside the relationship. Still, they could not come out of the relationship. Marriage is a sacred bond, as they commonly feel.

Kota Neelima, on the other hand, brings out the facet of the country in the era of globalisation, with a focus on Indian agricultural system. Kota Neelima, through her fictional and non-fictional works like *Riverstones*, *Shoes of the Dead*, *Death of a Moneylender* and *Widows of Vidarbha* presents the world of agriculture and farmers, that is conveniently neglected, ortaken for granted. Foregrounded on journalism and agrarian crisis, the works of Kota Neelima explores the rural India in its true colours.

Kota Neelima's *Riverstones*, a novel of twenty-one chapters, follows the life journey of Dr. Arihant Mohan, also known as Ari, while simultaneously highlighting India's agrarian crisis against the backdrop of hunger strikes, the first ten chapters primarily focus on Ari's personal and professional struggles, but a dramatic shift occurs in the later chapters, altering his life



trajectory. An embedded narrative—Dr. Hamsa’s three-part, incomplete story—gradually unveils the hidden truths of Ari’s birth and parentage.

The novel’s central conflict unfolds when Kapil Rao, a social activist leading a hunger strike for farmers’ rights, dies after being accidentally struck by a police officer during a protest. Deeply moved by Kapil’s death, Ari steps forward to continue the strike. The Minister’s Relief Fund for farmers, a key aspect of the novel, is portrayed as a flawed system—while the government announces various aid schemes, their inefficiencies and delays only exacerbate the crisis. Farmers, desperate for relief, are left waiting as bureaucratic obstacles prolong the process, pushing many into deeper debt and even suicide. Additionally, only four out of twenty-eight states receive aid, leaving countless farmers abandoned.

Through Ari’s character, the novel suggests a hopeful resolution to the crisis. The gathering of farmers from across the country at Jantar Mantar in Delhi symbolizes the national agricultural struggle. Despite their hardships, they travel to support Ari, using press interviews to expose the harsh realities of Indian farming. Neelima’s novel thus presents a powerful critique of systemic failures while advocating for reform.

As the novel records in its Chapter Two, ‘*The course of a river is not decided by riverstones that are smoothed out by the flow of water but by those which retain identity despite strong currents.*’ (Kota 25), the novel depicts the strong riverstones in the strong currents of socio-political turmoils in the nation.

Kota Neelima’s *The Death of a Moneylender* (2016) explores the ongoing agrarian crisis, contemporary journalism, rural credit systems, and private moneylending in India. Through this novel, Neelima sheds light on the harsh realities of private moneylending in rural India, a system deeply entrenched in the country’s socio-economic fabric despite modernization and government-led banking reforms.

Private moneylending has existed from historic times to the globalized age, remaining a crucial element of rural economies. While banks and government schemes aim to provide financial aid, their bureaucratic inefficiencies—lengthy documentation, complex procedures, and red tapism—often push farmers toward private moneylenders. These lenders, despite charging exorbitant interest rates and imposing life-threatening conditions, remain the only accessible source of financial assistance for many low-income farmers. Unlike bank officials, moneylenders live within the same communities, making their a familiar and unavoidable presence. Generations of indebted farmers continue to rely on these lenders, leading to a cycle of financial entrapment. However, the relationship between farmers and moneylenders



is not one of mutual support but of exploitation, often resulting in tragic farmer suicides due to unpayable debts and abusive treatment.

Amidst this grim reality, Neelima's novel takes an unusual turn by focusing on the death of a moneylender, a rare occurrence in a system where farmer deaths are tragically commonplace and often ignored. True to her signature style, she presents this unconventional issue not merely for critique but as a call for change.

The novel also delves into the pressures and politics of journalism through the characters of Seth, a controlling sub-editor of a Delhi-based newspaper, and Falak Anand, his subordinate. Seth dictates news narratives before coverage, stifling journalistic independence. The relentless pressure of deadlines and pre-determined storylines highlights the struggles of media professionals in a politically charged environment.

Kota Neelima's 2013 novel, *Shoes of the Dead*, explores contemporary agriculture, rising cases of farmer suicides, the struggles of farm widows, nepotism in politics, and systemic corruption. At the heart of this novel is Gangiri Bhadra, an extraordinary yet unconventional hero. Unlike traditional heroes who resort to violence, Gangiri embodies patience, resilience, and moral courage.

A teacher by profession with a promising career, Gangiri's life takes a drastic turn following the suicide of his brother, Sudhakar Bhadra, a distressed farmer crushed by recurring crop failures and mounting debt. Driven by grief and a sense of duty, Gangiri embarks on a mission to investigate the root causes of farmer suicides and become the voice of the oppressed. His activism challenges the political establishment, particularly Keyur Kashinath, a privileged young leader of the Democratic Party, who seeks to dismiss farmer suicides as isolated incidents. The clash between Gangiri and Keyur symbolizes the battle between the powerless and the powerful, the dispossessed and the elite.

Tragically, Gangiri's relentless pursuit of justice renders him so vulnerable that he takes his own life, sacrificing himself for the cause he fought for. His death is not a defeat but a testament to the grim realities of systemic injustice. Neelima's portrayal of the agrarian crisis is deeply rooted in reality—her heroes do not always emerge victorious but often suffer personal losses.

The novel also critiques nepotism in Indian politics through Vaishnav Kashinath, a seasoned politician intent on securing a stable political career for his foreign-educated son, Keyur. Gangiri's exposure of real suicide cases threatens their ambitions, revealing the lengths to



which political elites manipulate statistics to maintain their power and conceal governmental inefficiencies.

Kota Neelima's *The Honest Season* (2016), a significant work of political fiction in Indian English literature. While the novel may initially appear unrealistic, it boldly exposes corruption at the highest levels of governance and administration, making it highly relevant to contemporary India.

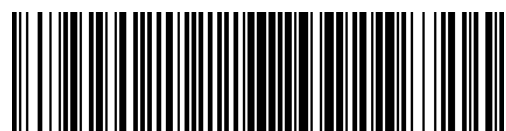
At the center of the novel is Sikander Bansi, a political heir who secretly records six explosive tapes implicating Cabinet Ministers and influential figures. Despite knowing these revelations could jeopardize his political future, he remains undeterred. However, his actions put the life of Mira Mouli, a fearless journalist, in grave danger. The recorded tapes unearth deep-seated corruption within the government, raising critical questions about the legitimacy of democratic institutions. Through this, Neelima paints a grim picture of politicians exploiting power while ordinary citizens are left helpless.

Mira Mouli, the novel's female protagonist, is portrayed as an orphan with a unique ability to anticipate events before they unfold, making her an exceptional investigative journalist. The novel not only follows her quest for truth but also explores the social struggles faced by orphans, adding depth to the narrative. As a gripping political thriller, *The Honest Season* also highlights the dirty power games between political rivals, who prioritize self-interest over public welfare. While Neelima is known for her focus on agricultural distress, this novel shifts attention to broader systemic inconsistencies in Indian society.

In all, Kota Neelima through her writing bring the India of farmers, in distress, even after more than seven decades of independence.

#### Conclusion:

Apparently, both the novelists, patriot by spirit and passionate for writing, delve into two stark worlds existing within India. The worlds of the affluent and the world of those in dire poverty, that dwell in India, are captured to the best and represented in their writing by the duo. The political struggle of the early phase after 1947 is the focus of Nayantara Sahgal while Kota Neelima strives to bring to the world, the grave reality of Indian agricultural system. Together, they, through writings bring to their readership a comprehensive picture of the nation.



## Bibliography

- Kota, Neelima. *Death of a Moneylender*. Roli Books.01 Oct 2009. Print.
- . *Shoes of the Dead*. Rupa Publications India Pvt. Ltd. 2013. Print
- . *The Honest Season*. Random House India. 28 Dec 2015. Print.
- . *Riverstones*. Penguin Random House India. 20 June 2016. Print.
- Sahgal, Nayantara. *Rich Like Us*. HarperCollins Publisher. 04 Aug 2008. Print.
- . *Storm in Chandigarh*. Penguin India. 19 Nov2008. Print.
- . *A Situation in New Delhi*. Penguin India.19 Nov 2008. Print.
- . *The Fate of Butterflies*. Speaking Tiger Pub. Pvt. Ltd. 10 Feb 2019. Print.
- Clark, T.W. *The Novels in India: Its Birth and Development*. University of California Press, 1970. Print.
- Dr. Mohanty S.K. *Indian Women Writers in English*. Surendra Publications, 2012. Print.
- Dr. Puniyani, Ram. *Religion, Politics and Women Equality*. Media House &SPCS, 2021.Print.
- Guha, Ramchandra. *India after Gandhi: The History of the World's Largest Democracy*. Pan Millan India, 2017. Print.
- Surinder, Sud. *The Changing Profile of Indian Agriculture*. BS Books, 2009.Online.
- Vaidya, Varsha. *Mind and Art of Nayantara Sahgal*. Dattsons Publisher,2014. Print.

