

## Colonial Legacy and Self-Discovery in Nayantara Sahgal's *A Time To Be Happy: A Postcolonial Reading*

**Dr. Meenakshi Sharma**

Associate Professor of English  
Govt. College for women, Karnal

**Dr. Neeraj Vashisth**

Assistant Professor of English  
Bhagwan Parshu Ram College  
Kurukshetra

### ABSTRACT

*Nayantara Sahgal's A Time To Be Happy portrays the unsteady atmosphere of post-independence India, where political freedom has been achieved but the deeper impact of colonial rule continues to change society. Set in the fictional town of Sharanpur, the novel depicts a society caught between holding on to the past and adapting to change. Colonial influence can still be seen not just in economic systems and class differences but also in people's ambitions, education, and even in how they view themselves and others. Issues like gender inequality and strong patriarchal norms further show that independence did not bring complete social change. Drawing on insights from major postcolonial theorists such as Edward Said, Homi K. Bhabha, Frantz Fanon, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, this study argues that Sahgal presents independence not as a complete break but as an ongoing process of negotiation, where colonial legacy continues to influence institutions, attitudes, and personal identity.*

*Through its protagonist, Sanad, the novel explores decolonisation as an internal ethical process rather than a purely political event. His gradual awakening is reflected in his rejection of discrimination and his growing sense of responsibility towards the nation. In this way, self-discovery comes through moral reflection and conscious decisions. Gandhian ideals of self-reliance and dignity offer an alternative model of rebuilding society, one that values responsibility rather than imitation of colonial models. At the same time, the revival of indigenous practices and the reclamation of colonial spaces suggest that freedom must be both outwardly asserted and inwardly realised. The novel presents colonial legacy and self-discovery as interconnected processes, showing that independence gains meaning only through ethical transformation. This paper examines how Sahgal connects continuing colonial influences with the gradual formation of a postcolonial identity.*

**Keywords:** Postcolonial Identity, Colonial Legacy, Mimicry, Gandhian Reconstruction, Economic Exploitation, Self-Discovery, Indian English Fiction, Decolonisation

India's freedom movement and post-independence transitional phase serve as the backdrop for Nayantara Sahgal's debut novel, *A Time to Be Happy* (1958). Although India achieved political sovereignty, the psychological, cultural, and economic consequences of colonialism continued to influence Indian society. Set in the North Indian town of Sharanpur, a fictional version of Saharanpur, the narrative unfolds within an upper-middle-class milieu adjusting to the transition from colonial rule to an uncertain sense of freedom. Sahgal portrays independence not as a triumphant moment, but as a complex and often uneasy transition. The narrator's observation that the nationalist movement was "far from being a purely political one. . . a great social organisation" (Sahgal 6) indicates that freedom must go beyond the constitutional

transfer of power to include actual social change. Decolonisation should be understood as a continuous process that includes economic, psychological, ethical, and cultural aspects, reflecting the ongoing struggles and adaptations that societies face in redefining their identities and values in the post-colonial context.

The narrator, a middle-aged bachelor and a family friend of the protagonist, Sanad Shivpal, recalls their lives through memory and reflection. He connects their individual experiences to broader historical transformations without reducing them to mere political symbols. Edward Said argues that imperialism endures as a “structure of attitudes and references” long after formal rule ends (8). Sahgal’s narrative vividly illustrates this legacy. Colonial habits of mind, economic hierarchies, educational systems, and cultural aspirations continue to influence the newly independent nation. The novel places India in what could be called the postcolonial condition, which is a time in history when freedom and inherited subordination exist side by side. Sharanpur itself reflects this paradox; it remains culturally rooted and distant from direct colonial control, yet its economy still relies on industrial systems introduced during the colonial period. In this way, the town serves as a microcosm of postcolonial India—independent in name, but still deeply influenced by its imperial past.

This condition cannot be separated from the long history of agrarian exploitation. Systems of revenue collection, such as mansabdari, zamindari, and ryotwari, forced cultivators to produce for distant rulers, leaving them with little control over their own land or labour. Gandhian thought emphasised that real progress must begin with village prosperity precisely because the Indian economy had long been agrarian and repeatedly subjected to exploitation. Sahgal shows an awareness of this history in her depiction of Sharanpur. The town’s industrial wealth exists alongside memories of rural suffering. The visible contrast between prosperity and poverty transforms economic disparity into a moral question: what does freedom signify in a society marked by deep structural inequality?

The central theme of this inquiry is self-discovery, most vividly represented by Sanad. English-educated and employed in the British firm Selkirk and Lowe, he appears successful within the colonial system. But he feels increasingly alienated from it. His inner struggle reflects the nation’s outward transition. Sahgal implies that independence only gains real significance when it is embraced as an ethical commitment, not just achieved as a political milestone. In this sense, decolonisation becomes an ongoing process of ethical transformation, not simply a one-time historical event. One of the most powerful manifestations of the colonial legacy in *A Time To Be Happy* is found in the sphere of economic organisation. Sahgal does not treat colonial exploitation as a mere historical injustice; rather, she finds it in the everyday realities of Sharanpur. The town, shaped by the British textile industry, becomes a symbolic and material site of imperial capitalism. Sahgal shows how colonial rule changed the economies of the native people and made structural dependency a permanent part of life through its mills, wage systems, and class divisions.

British colonialism in India was not merely political governance; it was a commercial enterprise. The East India Company began as a trading company and slowly turned into a governing body. Its economic policies favoured British manufacturing while systematically weakening local production. The narrator's recollection of Bengal's trade monopoly is a direct

reference to this historical pattern: “The East India Company. . . monopolised the trade in Bengal, killing it forever as an independent industry. Lancashire cotton flourished only because all Indian competition was wiped out” (Sahgal 104). The destruction of indigenous textile industries was not accidental but central to British industrial growth. In this sense, Lancashire’s prosperity was built upon the deliberate deindustrialisation of India. The economic system does not change immediately even after achieving independence. Wage disparities still exist, factories are still operating, and industrial networks are still in place. The old structure essentially stays the same despite the transfer of political power. Sharanpur’s economy reflects this postcolonial situation. Its mills, which constantly emit smoke, symbolise industrial progress but also point to a growing sense of social alienation. Workers shift from agrarian life to wage labour, becoming detached from traditional rural ways of living, while older crafts slowly decline. The town’s transformation thus reflects India’s uncertain path of development after Independence. The colonial legacy, thus, continues to exist, not through direct political control, but through the enduring influence of inherited economic and institutional systems.

The colonial legacy continues to impact the industrial sector. Sanad’s position at Selkirk and Lowe shows how racial discrimination becomes institutionalised. When he is offered lower wages than newly recruited British employees, the manager justifies the disparity: “You must remember they leave their country to come and work out here” (Sahgal 104). The inequality is justified as reasonable, revealing how deeply colonial attitudes remain embedded in professional life. This reasoning is similar to what Frantz Fanon calls the “compartmentalised colonial world,” which is a system that divides people into groups of privilege and subordination (*The Wretched of the Earth* 3). In such a world, inequality is normalised and justified through racial hierarchy. The coloniser’s mobility is treated as a sacrifice, while the labour of the colonised people is taken for granted. Within this context, Sanad’s refusal to accept discriminatory wages marks the beginning of his ethical awakening. His response is not merely personal but signifies a rejection of the inherited hierarchy itself. Economic self-respect thus becomes an important step in his broader process of self-discovery.

If the colonial legacy in *A Time To Be Happy* survives through economic structures, it operates even more subtly at the level of the mind. Sahgal shows that colonial domination does not end with political freedom; it remains in habits, thoughts, desires, and ways of measuring self-worth. Through characters like Sir Harilal Mathur and Govind Narayan, she illustrates how empire influences not only institutions but also consciousness itself. Sir Harilal Mathur is described as “one of the most successful creations of the British Raj” (Sahgal 17), a phrase that carries deeper significance. He is not simply a man who prospered during colonial rule; he is someone created by it. His knighthood, his public loyalty to imperial causes, and his admiration for British authority reveal how deeply his identity is based on colonial approval. His achievements carry prestige, yet that prestige comes with imperial recognition. Sahgal subtly exposes the cost of such validation: it produces elites who adopt imperial values and internalise their hierarchies. Homi K. Bhabha’s concept of mimicry provides a crucial interpretive perspective to understand this condition. Mimicry, according to Bhabha, produces a colonial subject who is “almost the same, but not quite” (86). The colonised elite imitates the coloniser’s manners, speech, and cultural codes, yet is never fully accepted as equal. Harilal imitates British manners and ideals, yet he can never fully belong to that world. His identity remains dependent

upon imperial approval rather than indigenous rootedness, which highlights the ongoing struggle for self-discovery in a colonial context. Similarly, Govind Narayan’s pragmatic acceptance of colonial rule reflects the normalisation of imperial authority. He remarks that “Life had to be lived. . .accepting the Raj, and using it to one’s own advantage” (Sahgal 15). This statement is more about adaptive survival than ideological allegiance. However, adaptation eventually turns into complicity. Once accepted, colonial authority no longer seems oppressive but rather useful.

Frantz Fanon’s analysis in *Black Skin, White Masks* deepens our understanding of this postcolonial condition. Fanon argues that colonisation penetrates consciousness, generating what he calls an inferiority complex rooted in racial hierarchy (18). The colonised subject often seeks elevation through assimilation to the coloniser’s culture. In Sahgal’s narrative, Harilal’s Anglophilia reflects precisely this perspective. His desire for recognition reflects his inner love for British values. However, Sahgal does not reduce mimicry to moral weakness. Instead, she presents it as historically conditioned. The colonial subject is influenced by systemic hierarchy, educational indoctrination, and economic dependency.

The psychological impact of colonial impact is visible in spaces like the British club and the polo ground, where “the natives are swarming all over the polo grounds” (Sahgal 272), showing a gradual shift from colonial dominance to reclaiming of these places. These places, once symbols of imperial rule, continue to influence people even after independence, as they still compare themselves with colonial standards. At the same time, Sahgal introduces a subtle irony, suggesting that such attitudes are not as strong as they appear. Mimicry creates an inner division, where individuals may seem Anglicised externally but feel uneasy internally. Thus, psychological colonialism becomes a real obstacle to true freedom. Therefore, decolonisation is not just about political change; it is also about changing the way people think. The reclaiming of these places reflects this inner change, but it is not complete, as many individuals and communities still struggle with the persistent effects of colonial mentality and the need for further cultural and psychological healing. Self-discovery persists, and decolonisation continues as an ongoing ethical process, not a fully achieved one.

Sahgal juxtaposes industrial capitalism with the Gandhian idea of a rural economy. In this context, Gandhian thought appears as a moral alternative to the continued influence of colonial power in industrial modernity. Within the broader context of colonial legacy and self-discovery, this contrast highlights an important concern of postcolonial discourse—the need to imagine forms of development that do not simply repeat the structures and values left behind by colonial rule. Gandhi’s call to “spin your own cloth” (Sahgal 7) is not just nostalgic; it is a practical idea based on self-reliance and local production. The spinning wheel becomes a symbol of resistance to industrial dominance and a reaffirmation of village-based economy. At the same time, Gandhian philosophy also challenges psychological colonisation by encouraging people to value their own traditions instead of seeking approval based on colonial standards. As the narrator recalls, Gandhi transformed everyday objects like salt and cloth into tools of resistance, linking economic action with moral awareness. In this way, the spinning wheel represents not only national identity but also ethical labour, self-reliance, and collective responsibility.

The colonial legacy continues in the economic sphere through inherited industrial structures. The textile mills in Sharanpur, though rooted in imperial exploitation, remain

operative even after independence. Rather than simply rejecting industry, Sahgal presents a conflict between industrial growth and rural regeneration, highlighting the complexity of rebuilding a postcolonial nation. The Rural Development Board further supports this shift by promoting village industries and local markets, aiming to restore economic autonomy to rural communities. These efforts mark a move away from imperial economic patterns to a more participatory model. Sharanpur itself reflects this change, evolving into a space that supports fairs and indigenous crafts.

Moreover, Gandhian philosophy in the novel challenges the colonial narrative of progress. British industrialism presented mechanisation as advancement, but Sahgal questions this view by showing that while mills increase production, they can also weaken community ties and diminish traditional crafts. In contrast, Gandhian simplicity values balance, self-reliance, and social cohesion, offering a different way of understanding development. This idea reflects Edward Said's view that imperial modernity imposed a single model of progress on colonised societies (8). By bringing in Gandhian alternatives, Sahgal reclaims the right to define development from an indigenous perspective, presenting it not as a perfect solution but as a moral possibility within existing limitations. At the end of the novel, the rural fair emphasises this vision by juxtaposing traditional crafts and vibrant community spaces with industrial uniformity, highlighting the efficiency of machines along with the care of artisanal labour. This Gandhian vision extends beyond economics into social consciousness. The nationalist movement as a "great social organisation" (Sahgal 6) suggests that freedom must involve moral awareness and collective responsibility. These ideas define Sanad's journey of self-discovery as he gradually distances himself from colonial structures and moves towards national rebuilding.

The novel explores the clash between colonial inheritance and growing postcolonial consciousness through Sanad as the central figure. While other characters reflect aspects of colonial legacy, such as economic collaboration or mimicry, Sanad represents the inner conflict of a generation influenced by colonial impact yet compelled to redefine itself after independence. His journey is not dramatic or heroic but reflective, unfolding through doubt, memory, and ethical decisions. Through him, Sahgal suggests that decolonisation begins within the self.

At the beginning of the novel, Sanad is not explicitly political. He admits, "I myself was never of a political turn of mind" (Sahgal 6), reflecting the condition of many educated Indians who grew up within colonial institutions and were deeply influenced by them. His employment at the British firm Selkirk and Lowe places him directly within the colonial economic system. When he is offered lower wages than British employees, justified by the claim that they "leave their country to come and work out here" (Sahgal 104), the injustice of colonialism becomes personal. In response, he recalls how the East India Company had "monopolised the trade in Bengal, killing it forever as an independent industry" (104). This reaction shows that his awakening is based on historical consciousness, as he begins to see colonial exploitation not merely as personal injustice but as systemic domination.

Sanad's dilemma reflects what Frantz Fanon describes as the struggle of the colonised intellectual to confront the contradictions of colonial education and rediscover cultural identity (*The Wretched of the Earth* 36). Caught between Western education and national dignity, he occupies what Homi K. Bhabha calls an "in-between" cultural space (4), a hybrid identity that is

partly colonial and partly postcolonial. His painful question, “Where are you, Bharat Mata. . .What is it that you ask of us?” (Sahgal 181), reveals uncertainty about the meaning of independence and his responsibility towards the nation. Sanad’s transformation is gradual rather than dramatic. His refusal to accept unequal wages symbolises his rejection of internalised inferiority. He does not reject modernity entirely, nor does he retreat into nostalgic traditionalism. Instead, he tries to achieve a balance between working in industry and following Gandhian values. This negotiation reflects Sahgal’s broader vision of postcolonial identity as evolving rather than absolute. His marriage to Kusum reflects his metamorphosis, implying that relationships and daily responsibilities define his self-discovery.

A revealing moment occurs when Ammaji questions colonial education: “Do they know what crops grow on their father’s land. . .What kind of learning do they acquire in school?” (Sahgal 24). This question highlights the gap between traditional knowledge and colonial schooling, which preferred the English language, European history, and Western ideas of progress over local realities. Edward Said’s opinion that imperialism transforms not only territory but also consciousness (8) is particularly relevant here. The colonial education influenced people’s thinking. It subtly conveyed the superiority of Western civilisations and the backwardness of colonised cultures. The alienation produced by such education is visible in the generational gap, where younger people appear detached from agrarian life and traditional practices. Ammaji’s question about crops symbolises more than agricultural knowledge; it signifies a deeper sense of rootedness. Colonial education, however, weakens this connection and creates a sense of dislocation, leading to a disconnection from cultural heritage and a loss of identity among the younger generation.

Sahgal also challenges colonial misinterpretations of Indian philosophy. When karma is dismissed as passive fatalism, the narrator clarifies, “Karma merely means living your life and doing your duty. . . .There was never a more challenging philosophy” (Sahgal 161). Tradition is presented not as backwardness but as a source of ethical strength. This reflects Homi K. Bhabha’s idea of ambivalence, where colonial discourse both admired and devalued native traditions (90). Cultural reclamation, therefore, becomes a process of recovering indigenous knowledge and reclaiming the authority to interpret it.

In *A Time To Be Happy*, the legacy of colonialism extends beyond politics and economics into gender relations. While the novel reflects national awakening, it also shows that independence does not automatically bring social equality. Patriarchal structures persist, revealing the limits of postcolonial liberation. The nationalist movement is described as “a great social organisation” (Sahgal 6), linking political change with social reform. Yet this reform remains uneven. Women appear in the novel, but their voices rarely influence decisions. Kusum, for instance, provides emotional support to Sanad, yet her role remains confined to the domestic sphere. She represents strength and stability, but not authority. This aspect reflects a wider pattern in nationalist discourse, where women are valued as preservers of tradition rather than instruments of change.

Spivak’s question, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” highlights the structural silencing of marginalised voices within colonial and postcolonial power systems (271). This question is relevant here, as women’s voices continue to be constrained and often influenced by others.

Colonial and patriarchal forces work together to define women's roles in society. While colonial discourse portrayed Indian women as oppressed, it also upheld traditional power structures. As a result, women become subjects of both control and representation. Marriage and family continue to define female identity, even as men engage directly with nationalism and development, which often limits women's roles to those of carers and supporters rather than active participants in these movements. Sahgal highlights silent constraint rather than open rebellion, making silence itself a sign of incomplete decolonisation. The image of "Bharat Mata" further complicates this issue. Although the nation is imagined as a mother figure, real women do not gain equal voice or power. Thus, gender in the novel reveals that postcolonial freedom remains partial. True self-discovery requires not only independence from colonial rule but also a rethinking of gender inequality.

In *A Time To Be Happy*, Nayantara Sahgal presents post-independence India not as a fully renewed nation but as a society still negotiating its colonial inheritance. Through its focus on economic structures, psychological struggles, Gandhian ethics, cultural recovery, gender inequality, and changing social spaces, the novel shows that colonial influence remains deep and persistent, making independence a beginning rather than an end. At the same time, Sahgal affirms the possibility of self-discovery through Sanad's gradual awakening, highlighting the inner dimension of decolonisation. His rejection of inequality and effort to balance modern life with Gandhian values suggest that self-discovery is a steady and responsible journey rather than a sudden transformation. Thus, the novel highlights the close relationship between colonial legacy and self-discovery, suggesting that true freedom requires not only political independence but also deeper psychological, cultural, and social change.

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