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A life less ordinary



WOMEN AND IDENTITIES Ritu Menon (left) and Nayantara Sahgal (centre), in conversation with Geetha Doctor. Photo: K.V. Srinivasan

Her's has been a life spent in the heady whirl of the Nehruvian era, writing lyrical but unsparing accounts of how India's elite reacted to crises that defined the nation. History and politics find frequent mention in her novels and essays that also consciously explore the first flush of feminism in India. Nayantara Sahgal, the second of three daughters born to Jawaharlal Nehru's sister Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit, wrote of women and the times that defined them, honing her focus on their identity through the miasma of family, caste and creed.

Ritu Menon, publisher, writer and co-founder of Kali for Women, India's first feminist press, is also keeper of the voices of Partition. With a lifetime spent challenging the notions of feminism in contemporary times, she has authored several books on the status of women in the subcontinent. She is also the author of *Out of Line: A Literary and Political Biography of Nayantara Sahgal*.

It was these two extraordinary women, subject and biographer, that Geeta Doctor, city-based journalist and writer, brought together on a rare platform at *The Hindu* Lit for Life. Nayantara and Ritu gave the audience, the many perspectives of being a woman in India, on being political and on keeping that sphere of life apart from the personal. They intertwined views of the past with the present — Geeta said growing up reading Nayantara's memoir *Prison and Chocolate Cake* was "to know of exciting times in pre-Independent India". They also juxtaposed politics with quiet lyricism and were outraged over the lack of support to writers with a fatalistic acceptance of how the idea of India is being redefined. What emerged was a collection of vividly-drawn portraits of growing up in a Nehruvian home, falling out with her favourite cousin, Indira Gandhi, telling the reader about the India that was, and the intersection of our personal and national identities.

To a question on where the political ended and the personal began, Nayantara said, “There was no difference between the two. Politics was something that intimately connected us at home. Everything that happened in the country had its influence on domestic life.” To this Ritu added, “Politics is also about gender relations that complete the complex relations of power. Which was why it was interesting to write about Nayantara.”

When Geeta mentioned that Nayantara had earlier said that she had not read Ritu’s biography, Ritu answered, “Why should she, she has lived it. I don’t know why she would want to.”

On her fallout with her famous kinswoman, Indira, Nayantara commented, “Our childhood years were spent in each other’s company. As a family we were close-knit and it isn’t true that my uncle favoured me more than he did his own daughter. I had no political ambitions and I was keen on writing. My life was defined by my love for words. We fell out during the dark days of the Emergency because I felt she had gone against what we as a family stood for. And she wouldn’t tolerate opposition from her own kith and kin. I could’ve been less confrontational about it but I have no regrets for what I wrote or said.”

Counting among her favourites, her novels *Rich Like Us* (it won the Sahitya Akademi Award for English) and *Mistaken Identity*, Nayantara also spoke on the “conquest of fear, a recurrent leitmotif in her novels,” as Geeta pointed out. “We can conquer fear by standing up and being counted. We have to exert power and speak up for the idea of the India we believe in.”

Endorsing this and calling for collective support from all artistes for writer Perumal Murugan, Ritu added, “It is sad that a person is driven to repudiate oneself in such a fashion. This aspect of Hindutva needs to be countered in unequivocal terms as to how we want to represent ourselves as a nation.”