

The Novels of Nayantara Sahgal: A Study in Female Psyche

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Abstract

The present paper is an attempt to explore the feminist concerns in the major novels of Nayantara Sahgal. The novelist has particularly concentrated on the typical dilemma of middle class educated Indian women who have to balance between the problems of marital adjustment and their assertion of Identity.

Keywords: Feminist, freedom, identity, equality, conflict.

Introduction

Emancipation of womanhood has always been an anxious area in the reformers' programme in all ages and all societies. 'Woman' is perhaps the weakest part of human society, weaker than the depressed and the low. It is not that there is anything low in the woman; the woman is a gem but she is persecuted. She is persecuted because her male partner is physically too strong to be kept within bounds and mentally too weak to stand low temptations. He makes her the tool of his enjoyment and rides roughshod in satisfying his carnal appetites. She is not only the object of individual lust but also a cause of jealousies between two or more rival parties and whenever any discord occurs; she is always to suffer, to suffer for her beauty, for her tenderness, for her gentle and captivating qualities. If a man wishes to assault his enemy, he will assault his womenfolk. The present position of women in India is due to the deterioration of the old ideal of womanhood. In ancient India, both in theory and practice, women were placed on a pedestal in society - equal to that of men. The men recognised no limitations to a woman's right to education; nor restricted her freedom of action. In the last quarter of the nineteenth century, great social reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Mahatma Gandhi, Bal Gangadhar Tilak and others raised their voices in favour of women. Under their influence, a group of educated women novelists like Toru Dutt, Raj Lakshmi Debi, Sita Chatterjee took to writing seriously about Indian women. But it was in the post-Independence period only that the woman question was treated extensively in the arena of Indian English novel. Indian women novelists like Kamala Markandaya, Shashi Deshpande, Gita Mehta dealt with the place, position, problems and plights of women in Indian society. They aimed at portraying realistically Indian women's sense of frustration and their alienation. Their characters are shown very often as torn apart by the conflicting forces of tradition and modernity. The predicament of working women is still worse, constantly aggravated by their problems of marital adjustment and their quest for and assertion of identity. This plight of the new Indian woman has been treated in sufficient detail by the novelist like Nayantara Sahgal. Nayantara Sahgal has particularly concentrated on the typical dilemma of middle-class educated and employed Indian women who have to balance between the problems of marital adjustment and their assertion of identity.

The daughter of Vijayalakshmi Pandit and niece of Jawaharlal Nehru, Nayantara Sahgal (1927-), a living genius, has occupied a distinct and distinctive place in Indian English novel by exploring the issues pertaining to women and their inner conflict. As a result, her novels have brought her wide recognition by winning laurels for their delineation of the woman's inner world. She has published till date nine novels. The present paper is an attempt to explore the feminist concerns in the major novels of Nayantara Sahgal, particularly in **Storm in Chandigarh** (1969), **A Situation in New Delhi** (1977) and **Mistaken Identity** (1988).

As said earlier, Nayantara Sahgal was blessed with grand family background which has been everlasting in the political limelight. She also participated in the Indian Freedom Movement, as a dedicated devotee of Mahatma Gandhi and Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru. Thus she had an upbringing in which politics was inevitably a strong ambience but her fiction is preoccupied with the modern Indian woman's search for freedom and self realization. Sahgal has herself candidly confessed:

In a sense writers write about the same thing all their lives though they may hang that theme on different frameworks. My on-going theme would probably be freedom.¹

Sahgal seems to be championing the cause of according equality to women. The view embodied in her novels is that the same code of morality be applied to both men and women. In the novel **Storm in Chandigarh** (1969), Sahgal takes up for

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treatment the theme of estrangement in marriages and evinces how marriages break over the issues of pre-marital and extra-marital sex relations. She raises a voice of protest against the practice of having one standard of morality for men and another for women. Here she portrays Inder who believes in two codes of morality, one for himself and another for his wife as even though he himself is not faithful to his wife Saroj, he resents her having lost her virginity before her marriage. This is evident from the following piece of conversation between him and his wife. "Well, why did you do it? That's what I keep coming back to. Why did you do it?" "I was found of him," she said wearily, "and I was curious. Is that a crime?" "Good God. Didn't you have any inhibitions, any sense of modesty? Couldn't your curiosity wait till you got married?"²

But Inder himself too had lost his virginity long before his marriage, as the narrator reports: "There had been no such nightmare to contend with until his marriage. He (Inder) had been precocious and successful in sex, robustly collecting experience where he found it. Saroj had plundered that robustness, made a tortured image of the body's surrender, and nailed him to the inquisitor's chair"³. Since he had a lot of erotic experience before his marriage, there is no ethical justification behind his expecting his wife to have none. Saroj undergoes even a beating for this fault of hers, but Inder never punishes himself for his faults of identical nature.

What lies embodied in the novel **Storm in Chandigarh** is, as Shyam Asnani observes that "Mere living together under the same roof, only the accumulating of a life-time's living habits, without any real bond of intimacies in spite of sex and children, the human substance between them dwindling is nothing but the mockery of marriage. True living lies in understanding each other, in mutual respect and trust, honesty and freedom, without a thought of dominance."⁴ What has been rejected here is the view that a wife is her husband's property and has no individuality outside of that system. Nayantara Sahgal knows intimately the segment of Indian society about which she writes and can easily empathize with it. She told an interviewer: "... the most ancient power structure in the world is that of male domination. All power-structures are very self-protective -especially if they feel threatened.... This is not a battle of a man against woman. It is a battle between those who believe in an equal society and those who don't. Definitely it is becoming a more permissive society and I am all for it. . . ."⁵

These lines evince that Nayantara Sahgal has portrayed the new Indian woman and her effort to understand herself and to preserve her identity as wife, mother and, above all, as a human being in the tradition – bound, male – dominated Indian society.

Nayantara Sahgal has created authentic female characters- flesh and blood characters whose problems and plights, aspirations and desires have been delineated in the Indian context. Most of her novels present a middle class woman's life. Her main concern is the urge to find oneself, to create space for oneself to grow on one's own. Her novels prominently centre around the woman's dilemma and conflict. For her portrayal of the predicament of educated Indian woman, her inner conflict and quest for identity, her disillusionment, Nayantara Sahgal may be called a 'feminist'.

Feminism surfaced in the Western world as a movement in support of the same rights and opportunities for women as for men. By 'feminism' is meant "both the awareness of women's position in society as one of disadvantage or inequality compared with that of men and also a desire to remove those disadvantages"⁶. Thus feminism is a movement from the point of view of, by, and for women. The concept rests on two basic beliefs: that women are disadvantaged of their sex and that this disadvantage can be and should be overturned. The woman question that gave birth to feminism is mainly concerned with the end of exploitation and injustice at home and in society and then demand for justice and equality in social, political, economic walks of life. Nayantara Sahgal's leanings towards feminism is quite marked in her next novel **A Situation in New Delhi** (1977). The fact comes to light when one studies how the woman undergoes torments defencelessly and why she seeks divorce. The woman character who has to undergo torments because she finds her husband incorrigible is Nadira, the wife of Usman Ali. Nadira feels herself to have been wronged by her husband, as she has come to know that he is in love with Devi, even though she herself has not shown even one single symptom of frailty, as the narrator reports: "Nadira, looking on, wondered how he could, without going near a woman, 'this' woman, look as if he possessed her utterly, a latent sensuality about even this ordinary leave-taking. It was the intangibles in her life with Usman that tormented her."⁷ Nadira is faithful to her husband in spite of the fact that Usman Ali married late as a result of which there is a wide gap between their ages. Nadira is hurt to find that her husband is availing himself of more freedom than a married man has a right to avail himself by making love to Devi. There is nothing

unnatural or extraordinary in a wife's desiring her husband to be exclusively hers as there is nothing unnatural in a husband's desiring his wife to be exclusively his. Inevitably, he has hurt Nadira very deeply, as is evident from the following exchange of remarks between them:

'Everyone has a past', said Usman, 'and the past has a way of continuing into the present. We can't at some point say it's over and done with. Bits of it linger and they should. It's part of the perfume of life.' 'I gave up everything when I married you,' said Nadira.

'That you did not. You brought it all with you, your attitudes, your prejudices. We all do.' Nadira drew a hand across her eyes. 'Very well Usman. What I mean is her. As long as our life was more or less normal I could put up with her. But now I don't know what to expect.'⁸

Nadira's compelling Usman to cease to be in love with Devi is not all unjustifiable. In the opinion of Sahgal, the way Nadira suffers torments defencelessly is typical of womenfolk who suffer at the hands of menfolk.

The novelist is pained to notice ways of subordinating women by male members of the society. The next novel **Mistaken Identity**, published in 1988 is deeply concerned with a woman's freedom from social constraints which hinder in the realisation of her identity. Nayantara Sahgal portrays, in this novel, a world of social freedom in which a woman can live a life of genuine fulfillment, of the true realisation of her real self. The novelist accomplishes this through a woman, the 'ranee' of Vijaygarh. Apparently Bhushan, her thirty-two year old son is the protagonist – narrator of the tale, but the really unique creation is the 'ranee' and hence she is the most significant figure of the world of radical social change.

The 'ranee' of Vijaygarh is, indeed, a bold woman, a social rebel of extraordinary guts. Married at the age of five, this middle-aged queen, notwithstanding the apparent fulfillment in worldly terms, lives a life of utter dissatisfaction and unfulfillment till towards the end of the narrative she leaves the prison-like palace for seeking fulfillment and inner peace in the arms of Comrade Yusuf, whose daughter, to her great joy, her son loves passionately. All her life with her husband Raja Sahib, she is denied freedom and fulfillment. No wonder she thoroughly disapproves of her husband's continual pursuit of sexual pleasures and new wives. She is an incarnation of modern enlightened woman who refuses to be considered as merely, to quote the words of Nayantara Sahgal, a "sex object and glamour girl, fed on fake dreams of perpetual youth, lulled into passive role that requires no individual identity"⁹. An embodiment of inner drive for change, she is out and out a rebel, questioning everything that hampers freedom, and hence she is endowed with the modern woman's characteristic virtue, to quote Nayantara's own words, "courage which is willingness to risk the unknown and to face the consequences"¹⁰. An inveterate seeker of freedom and fulfillment, she fully understands her son who pines for freedom of choice and fulfillment because of the tyranny of circumstances and the strictness of his dominating father. That is why, her son proclaims: "Mother was the only person who didn't think there was anything wrong with me"¹¹. The cry of her inner being, given to emancipation, is most appropriately described in the concluding paragraph of the novel, showing clearly that at last she is able to find herself by abandoning her narrow prison-like existence:

Early one morning she left the family mansion. I saw her hesitate for a second at the entrance and hold her breath before she walked out to star in the most sensational scandal of the generation. Society has not forgiven this liaison between an illiterate ranees and her communist lover, and the shameless public exhibition they make of it. But Mother and Yusuf are so love-mad, they haven't noticed their notoriety. I can't say any of it surprises me as far as Mother is concerned. As I said, this is the Ganges heartland where we breathe the air of miracles. Besides, I've known this woman since she was twenty-two, and sentenced to that greenish light of unfulfilled desire. I couldn't have guessed she'd escape it, but before long I was sure no sun would have the nerve to melt her if she did. It is Yusuf whose capacities I never suspected.... He won't go high in the party hierarchy now. He'll stay where he is, at the middle rungs. And Mother won't care. With money, manners, and lineage, who needs a job? Mother is extremely vague about his job. She knows nothing about communism but she knows a man when she embraces one. This winter they'll be in Leningrad where she'll see falling snow¹².

Through this ranees's outright rejection of her domineering and pleasure seeking husband, Nayantara gives an artistic expression to her well-founded belief in gender equality. The middle aged 'ranees' has been craving for freedom from the old rotten ties

and confinement in the suffocating palace for decades. She leaves the palace once for all with her Muslim lover Comrade Yusuf and intends to go to Leningard in the coming winter to enjoy snow-storm to fulfil her long-cherished desire. Having gone through the preceding discussion, we realise that the women who as girls, wives and mothers confront a male-dominated and tradition-oriented society, live under the twin whips of domestic injustice and tyranny. The women in the above novels can be seen as providing a point of view as they struggle from inadequate and unequal basis to achieve a measure of stability and inner peace. It is a fact now that the women worldwide are struggling and suffering in the process of their emancipation. Though their suffering lacks heroic grandeur expected of a tragic heroine yet their contribution in adjusting the lens of social binoculars, to view an 'individual' inside every woman, cannot be neglected. What Nayantara Sahgal intends to show us through the struggle of her women characters is how women realise their rights, priorities, identify ungratified desires and work towards their fulfillment. To conclude, Nayantara Sahgal reveals new voice and vision in this dismal social, political and cultural milieu. She keeps on striving to build the new society that must contribute to the empowerment of women. It is a long road ahead but the women in the novels of Nayantara Sahgal serve as beacon lights of hope and endeavour.

Objective of the Study The objective of the study is to voice the struggle, suffering and conflict of women as girls, wives and mothers in the dismal social and cultural milieu; thereby contributing to the cause of the empowerment of women and gender equality.

Conclusion The novelist has been successful in her portrayal of the Indian women who serve as beacon lights of hope and endeavour.

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