



# Feministic Approach and Transformation of characters in the works of Nayantara Sahgal – A Study

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## Introduction

My paper analyses the present situations of every women in the society who urges and struggles for their identity and transformation towards life and matters, also to showcase how women emerge slowly realizing their strength and become assertive individuals thereby rejecting limited space reserved. She become strong and ace towards better understanding to self and society . Nayantara Sahgal is an Indian English woman novelist who is interested in portraying women and their roles in her novels. She assigns mostly traditional roles to her characters and later makes those women voice their expectations and frustrations in life. All her women are seen docile in their lives but later made to be rebels against their husbands or patriarchal domination. They are not able to adjust themselves to the society's expectations when their needs and aspirations are nullified and as a result they are muted and their voice is castrated.

## Feministic Approach

The paper examines the transformation of women characters that undergoes the change from submissive to a challenging and strong character in the novels of Sahgal. Nayantara Sahgal emerged as one of the most significant voices in the realm of Indian English fiction. The main focus is on how the women characters of Nayantara Sahgal overcome the challenges to be identified in the family as well as in the society. Variety of role is being played by the Indian women since ancient era to till modern era. The paper throws light on the conviction and challenges required in every woman at every stages of life.

The Indian women novelists depict Indian situation and characters in their novels. They are also rooted in the history and culture of the soil of India. Besides their Indianness, they try to view a feminine perspective. In the novels of the Indian English women writers, Indian woman has been studied and analysed in her traditional background. Women novelists portray the struggling, conflicting and frustrating Indian woman in their novels. It shows that women writers are interested in portraying the conflict between tradition and modernity, images and roles, career and expectations, and so on. Women and their Roles In India, the Post-Independence period has witnessed the emergence of women novelists.

Sahgal, in her novels, presents the emergence of the new woman who is no longer “a sex object and glamour girl, fed on fake dreams of perpetual youth called into a passive role that requires no individuality” ( Sahgal, “Women : Persons or Possessions,” The Hindustan Times, 19 July, 1970), but someone who can claim to be man’s equal partner. Ranjit Singh in “Identity, Quest and Conventions at Cross Roads : A Study of Select Novels of Nayantara Sahgal ” says : “Having experienced the agony of marital discord which resulted in a divorce in her life, Nayantara Sahgal gives a vivid and authentic account of an Indian woman’s plight in the modern world and her quest for individual freedom and self-realization” (58-9). Sahgal understands that she belongs to a period of transition.

Simrit, in *The Day in Shadow* (1971) is a projection of Sahgal herself and her search of her identity run parallel to Sahgal’s search for self-assertion. The very first chapter shows that Simrit has left Som’s world who is a traditional male and to him Simrit is merely a lovely showpiece of his house. He has belonged to a world where women for use had been the rule to long. His chauvinism is seen everywhere, not only in his interaction with his wife but also with his children. Now she simply wants to exit from this socially imposed bondage i.e. their marriage. But freedom becomes impossible within the marriage. She finds that marriage is one mistake which has to pay for all her life. Divorce then seems the only way out from all this. Luckily from Simrit-Raj breathes life into her again and like the phoenix she raises from her ashes. Raj lets her be. She has the silent assurance that “she would be the part of the process”. Now she feels that she is not weak and also have the existence like other human beings. Pixie is the other female character of the novel and her mental and physical exploitation by Sumer Singh also shows her quest for identity. She is a widow with a child. Sumer’s character is the resemblance of Sam’s character. The difference in the story of Simrit and Pixie is part accidental part character related. Gauri is not a typical woman of Sahgal. She is fashionable yet docile woman. For her materialistic pleasures of life are so important that she had no aspirations and ambitions beyond them. She is much like Pinky of *Rich Like Us* - happy with her life simply because it is smoothly going on. As far as the question of identity concerned, she is blissfully ignorant of it.

A Situation in New Delhi (1977) is another work of Nayantara Sahgal in which the character Devi is an important and an exception not only among Sahgal's women but also among the majority of women we came across. Freedom is her prime destination and have a number of affairs with men but also among the majority of women we came across. She has truly achieved the dream of equality of sexes. She enjoys freedom and can have a number of affairs with men. In her character, Sahgal has tried to bring out the conflict of two aspects of a woman –the woman and the cabinet minister. As a politician she searches for satisfaction in the mass movement led by Usmaan. In her case we can observe that neither Usmaan nor Michael could give satisfaction to a woman within her. Men desire her but she likes to live in shadow of her brother. She in fact coexists with her brother. And soon after her brother, she becomes too much of a minister, and ignores herself as woman. She admits that the presence of Michal is like a soothing therapeutic marriage. If Michal is a clear friend, Usmaan gives me courage. In other words Michal and Usmaan are two strong pillars which support the being of Devi.

Sahgal's next novel Rich like Us (1985) has her first woman who is a foreigner and it also has her second and last career women Sonali. The imposition of Emergency in 1975 has been used as the backdrop. The story is presented through the conscience of two women Sonali and Rose who is the specimen of modern women. Sonali who grows up with a dream to fulfil a new tradition to create for her own independence. Her job requires her to compromise many issues. She has been an independent girl since her collage days. At oxford she felt a new found freedom. Sonali is not only mentally and economically free but also emotionally strong. In her rejection of Ravi Kachru, his childhood friend she rejects the borrowed order and security of home. She learns from her family history, she is not the only victim of the system. In some respects Sonali is a continuation of Devi. Both are single, free and independent. Sonali's struggle for self-determination is somewhat different that of other women. Another female character is Rose; a friend of Sonali who is facing such like problems at home front. Rose the foreigner is as much a picture of victimization, as is Sonali the Indian woman. Rose left her people, her company and even her self-respect at times for Ram. It was only for love that she defied her family, her parents, and her religion and come to India for Ram as his wife. Forgetting herself she comes with Ram in order to search for her new existence as a living being. Her submission is a result of her strength and her pride. Sahgal says for her-"a woman's instinct to cherish and preserve". Mona and Rose the two wronged wives of Ram explores the concept of sister hood. These two women then present the supreme example of love and sharing. Their relationship is based on natural sympathy trust and mutual sympathy and trust. During the time of Mona's death, Rose promises to look after Dev her stepson and his new bride which helps Mona to die in peace. Here the writer exploits the possibility of co-operation among women which may lead to freedom.

Thus the changing role of women in literature from the past to the present indicates the evolution of women. From the ancient scriptures, Vedas, Upanishads, Epics and Puranas we can see how women characters have traits that had unfair moments of subjugation due to their gender. Women were considered as the object of pleasure. In fact these characters were curated and edited to suit the needs of a patriarchal society. Thus it is apparent from the medieval literature that the women characters underwent significant changes and now as days passed on women gradually began to express more of her opinion and had equal role in the society.

Besides their Indianness, they try to view a feminine perspective. In the novels of the Indian English women writers, Indian woman has been studied and analysed in her traditional background. Women novelists portray the struggling, conflicting and frustrating Indian woman in their novels. It shows that women writers are interested in portraying the conflict between tradition and modernity, images and roles, career and expectations, and so on. K. Meera Bai in "Tradition and Modernity: The Portrayal of Women by Women Writers" is of the view that the conflict between tradition and modernity finds a prominent place in the portrayal of women by women characters. Women who conform to the existing moral ethics and codes and social norms, especially with regard to their relationship with men, and reactions to familial frictions can be termed as traditionalists. Those who defy traditions and opt for modernity are non-conformists. (35) Indian woman in general is expected to be gentle, acceptable, adjustable, accommodative, pliable and service-minded. She is conditioned by traditions and conventions as she upholds them.

### Transformation of Characters

The essential and existential questions that are asked at the deeper levels of the quest for identity are "who am I?", "What am I doing here? "Moreover "Where do I come from"? A sense of loss and purposelessness and an oppressive need to know the answer to these questions. The quest for identity refers. To the spiritual odyssey of the modern man who has lost his social and spiritual moorings.

Women are made to voice their needs but there is no one to listen to their genuine longings. All her protagonists are from middle-class Indian families, but they remain failures as they are doomed by what the society needs from them. Kavita Dubey in Power Politics and Women Empowerment in the Novels of Nayantara Sahgal : A Critical Assessment observes : "What she aims at in her novels is not to set one sex against another but at the elimination of injustices, inequalities and inequities perpetrated by men on women so that they can realize themselves and live as free individuals" (48). It is as Sahgal spoke to R.S. Sharma : "I feel that Indian women are conditioned to stay, put in the home, no matter what difficulties they face" (1). Her women characters try to become themselves by staying within the limits of Indian tradition

and its values. Further, Sahgal admits to Sharma : “Some of my women characters are caught up in traumatic domestic situations, and they show great staying power through their trials” (1). Commenting on Sahgal’s portrayal of women, J. Samuel Kirubahar and R. Meena in “Theme of Marital Dissonance in Nayantara Sahgal’s “The Day in Shadow” aver:

Nayantara Sahgal has an independent approach to women's problems in India as she does not accept the social tradition emphasized through religious mottos and economic needs that failed to give the meaning to the concept of marriage and woman's individual identity. Woman has never been accepted as a full-human being and as a result it causes her consistent suffering and miserable life in which her life ends in self-immolation. (13)

Most of Sahgal’s women characters become captive in marriage even though they are from the good educational background. They want to assert their identity even though they have been tamed within marriage. What they want is not political freedom but freedom that concerns an individual. So that only commenting on the role of women in Sahgal’s novels, J. Samuel Kirubahar and R. Meena further delineate :

Sahgal places her women characters, mostly with good educational background, in conflict with a parochial society and depicts their struggle to pop out of their shells. Even though her novels deal essentially with the woman's identity crisis, there are however, minor instances in the narrative that highlight the novelist’s awareness of socio-political problems and individual freedom, because they are eventually concerned with human beings. All her novels deal with the freedom in both public and private life. Her women characters like Simrit are unhappy, because they feel thwarted in the absence of individual freedom. However, Nayantara Sahgal does not deal with the plight of widows. Nevertheless, she is as much concerned about the emancipation of woman as she advocates inner freedom for her woman and demands recognition as equals, be men at home and in society. (13-4)

It is as Ralph J. Crane in an “Introduction” to Nayantara Sahgal’s *India : Passion, Politics, and History* says that “All Sahgal’s work, like that of Shashi Deshpande, is firmly rooted in India (despite her own education abroad, and frequent travel outside India), though western characters in India frequently play significant roles in her fiction (**Michael Calvert in A Situation in New Delhi, Rose in Rich Like Us and Anna Hansen in Plans for Departure**)”



Sonali in Rich has to struggle hard to maintain her identity and keep her individuality being inviolate. Besides these, the novels also deal with the stigma of rape, the issue of arranged marriage, and revolution. *Departure* and *Identity* deal with woman's quest for self-fulfilment. A Parsee girl in *Identity* but Razia needs liberation as she makes efforts to liberate herself and takes lead in her love affair with Bhushan Singh.

We can see how literature witnessed the roles of women evolving through ages. Starting from pre independence writing to the modern writing we can see how women slowly gained equality. By studying the changes we can observe that not only the characters embody the female identity, but also the heroine transformed into the new figures that women aspire to be. Most of the early novels were written by men and dealt with the social issues like widow remarriage, child marriage and suppressed life of Indian married women. During the second part of the 20th century, there was a change in the lives of the Indian women. This change was brought into the writings of the women writers who attempted to portray the existing conditions of the women trying to seek their fulfilment and carving their own identity. She has clearly described that all her female characters are a mere reflection of the present social environment and highlights the mental misery and psychology suffering of stereotyped women in married life. She always wanted to give the message to the society through her women character that freedom must be accompanied by a sense of responsibility, hence women have to realise this for their betterment and progress. The tradition of women being portrayed in literature as submissive and docile has been due to the inferior positions women have held in the male dominant society. The times are changing and women are becoming the source of inspiration to many writers now. On the surface, her women characters seem to be happy and contented in marriage but in the deeper levels of their psyche, they feel being alienated and humiliated and they are not able to voice their aspirations and longings in their roles as married women. Sahgal in her novels transforms her own experience of the traumatic marriage and the consequent divorce together with what she observed, understood and sympathized in the contemporary world, into fiction. She, as a socio - political novelist portraying the twentieth century Indian milieu, describes the conflict of values among married woman. Different types of married women are presented in her novels. The women portrayed in her earlier novels are very conventional and extremely submissive housekeepers. They are the tradition-bound wives. Some do not think of quitting the family.

A 'New Woman' is in search of self-identity, seeking liberation in all walks of life, replacing the traditional image of Indian woman. The need for women to seek their identity is the message in her novels. Women who are conscious of their emotional needs and strive for self-fulfillment rejecting the existing traditions and social set-up and long for a more liberal and unconventional way of life finds their place in the novels of Nayantara Sahgal. Her novels portray women trampled and oppressed because of their dependence upon men and the harrowing experience they have to face in their struggle

to come out of the bondage and stand on their own feet. The hardship and suffering involved in fighting against an established order, the shattering experience of divorce and the resultant alienation between parents and children form the thematic concern of Sahgal's novels. Sahgal is deeply concerned with the failure of marital relationships and the loneliness of living; hence most of her women remarry. Maya is a silent victim at the altar of marriage. Sahgal's women characters suffer because they refuse to submerge their individuality and cling to their personal identity at all costs. Maya suffers because she refuses to lose her identity. Sahgal shows her acute awareness of the dependent status of women in society. Celia, Barbara and Nita, in their ultimate dependence on Kalyan betray the failure of their search for identity. In the character of Nita, Sahgal explores the place of a woman in Indian society before marriage. Nita is the young, beautiful daughter of Dr. Narang, who is a queer blend of Eastern and Western culture. Nita's parents want to settle down their daughter in marriage. They do not give any importance to the wishes of her daughter and force her to marry the man of their choice whom she neither loves nor admires. Finally, she agrees to her parents' choice of Vijay as groom. Though she is aware that Vijay views her as a possession not as an individual, and this kind of marriage has no prospects of fulfilment. Nita desires to live her own life and discover the needs of her body, rejecting the values and ideas of the previous generation thrust upon her. She offers herself to the irresistible Kalyan, the man of her choice. Nita's pre-marital relationship with Kalyan is the result of an attempt to fulfill her inner desire for love and communication. When the time comes to decide about her marriage, her parents decide her future. Through the character of Nita, Sahgal shows the conventional narrow-minded Indian society, where life-partners are chosen by the parents.

Sahgal's concept of emancipation reaches its culmination duly and justly in her novel *Mistaken Identity* (1988). In the novel, we meet a woman who is out and out a rebel. The Ranee of Vijaygarh defies all moulds and definitions. She is a class apart. She breaks all boundaries and makes her own rules. She married at the age of five, brought to her husband's home at thirteen, had to wait for nine long years to be blessed with a son. She belongs to an age when women were expected to stay behind veil. She remains completely detached and isolated in her family mansion. She faces a very subtle and inhuman form of exploitation. She is uneducated, rather illiterate, has an apathetic husband, has nothing to look forward to, and yet she dares to shun her husband from her life, when she discovers the man has no respect for her kind. There is no one to support her in her crusade against female exploitation and yet she dares to challenge the authority of her husband in his own home. The woman behind the veil breaks all ties with her husband, when he marries for the third time. In fact, her free spirit, her strong will, submitted to the demands of neither her husband nor the world. Her life lacks continuity and warmth, she feels isolated. She knows nothing about women's liberation, she becomes a strong practitioner of the same because whatever measures she takes to insulate her self-respect from tyrannical forces, she

does so without the support of anyone else. When in the end she breaks free from all preventions and marries comrade Yusuf, it is without any infesting sense of guilt that she does so. Her marriage to Yusuf is not an effort to seek refuge from the evils that Raja has subjected to her. Such refuge, she does not ask for. She does not ask support even from her son Bhushan. She walks her own proud way even when there is no comrade Yusuf in her life. Here, Sahgal shows a steady evolution in the course of her writing career. Raneer marks the culmination of the onward march of Sahgal's new woman towards freedom. Both the women novelists portray the image of women in her novels. They have portrayed a man-woman relationship with different perspectives. Their women characters especially only after they have gone through their own experiences, come to their real self. They also revolt against the traditional image of Indian women in words and deeds, be it in business or sexual spheres.

## Conclusion

Nayantara Sahgal has earned a separate space for their particular attention towards psychological insight and existential concerns. These new generation of writers talked about the self-realization of women. The high class, educated, sensible women became protagonist in her novels. Her women were new class of women whose lives were not infested by problems of dowry or poverty. These Indian women lived a blessed life as far as material standards are concerned, but there was something wanting, some vacuum in their lives. These women were facing the problem of identity. They show concern about basic human problems and to them woman is a mother, a wife, a daughter, a housewife, a working woman and above all she is a woman. Her women are the victims of a male-dominated society. In her novels men are not always sinners or oppressors. She explores the identity of the oppressor and shows a holistic approach to the problems of women through her novels. They have raised woman's issues and strove to reach to their solutions as well. An attempt has been made through this paper about the status of Indian women in the writings of Nayantara Sahgal in which she represent new morality, according to which woman is not to be taken as a mere toy, an object of lust and momentary pleasure, but man's equal and honoured partner. The women characters undoubtedly reveal their feminist ideology. The paper seeks to provide a complete study of the identity and transformation of woman in the novels of Nayantara Sahgal.



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