



# Searching The Identity And Self-Confidence By Female Protagonists In The Novels Of Nayantara Sahgal

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**Abstract:** Nayantara Sahgal has presented in her novels modern Indian women's search for definitions about the self and society and the relationship that are central to women. She portrays in her novels that her new woman is trying to search for her identity and create for herself a new place in the society. She is conscious of her existence as an individual who has her own rights and wishes. Sahgal asserts that these women are the ones who have the spirit to raise their voice against it, hence creating awareness for the rest.

**Keywords:** appendage, reluctant, identity crisis, companionship, suffragettes, parochial.

Nayantara Sahgal has consistently rejected a philosophy of endurance or compromise for women trapped in unfulfilling marriages. Her novels project divorce as a traumatic but unavoidable resolution to a permanently broken marriage, necessary if the woman is to live with dignity and self-respect. In all the novels, the protagonists and marginal women characters are shown to be working out their own path through this difficult terrain. Through her courageous and confident depiction of women who refuse to be outwardly in bondage to a dead relationship, Nayantara Sahgal significantly re-defines the traditional idea of female virtue and marital morals. Sahgal's unusual concept of female virtue is particularly seen in her handling pre-marital and extra-marital sexual relationship in the society where outside marriage is still widely regarded as a sign of promiscuity. Where even a close platonic relationship can be considered an act of marital infidelity, Sahgal consistently depicts such relationships from a very different perspective. She suggests that any relationship is to be viewed with reference to a situation. Revoking patriarchal models of marital morality exclusively based on

the wife's sexual fidelity. Such an attitude disturbs the traditional patriarchal order by placing the burden of the relationship equally on the man and the woman. The woman is freed from the sole responsibility of preserving a marriage through the rejection of all selfish desire and expectation. A feminist stance does not necessarily look for an exclusion of male support and guidance but it does demand that the process of change should emerge from the woman, as a conscious attempt to re-define her life. Sahgal gives the male characters the role of crystallizing the heroine's feeling of discontent and guiding her to the solution. What ultimately emerges is a feminism hesitating to extend itself fully, losing itself in the author's liberal humanist beliefs.

Earlier, woman sought her identity in the relations of as a wife, mother and daughter. She accepted this identity willingly. But now time has changed and a woman rejects this relational identity. Now she is able to understand the duplicity of this identity that is imposed on her by society so that she may restrain herself as a being. But now woman wants to stand on her feet as a full human being, equal to man in society, she doesn't like to know herself as someone's daughter, wife or mother, rather than she seeks separation from these relations and wants to make her own identity that shows her individuality. She also does not like the support of man in making her own identity. And it is the quest for identity in a woman that she revolts against the traditional image of Indian woman in words and deeds. She is conscious of herself as a being, not as an object. She realizes that she is not an appendage of man. She is not an addition to man. She is an autonomous being, capable of through trial and error; finding her own way to salvation. Therefore, a new modern girl is reluctant to play the conventional role of a sex object and a yoked wife. In a sense, she is the symbol of the emancipated woman, the forerunner of the emerging Indian woman with her liberated womanhood. Thus through self-identity they are independent like man. They have established themselves as autonomous beings, free from the restrictions imposed by society, culture, nature and also free from their own fear and guilt; thus women have reached a stage of understanding the fundamental truth; you have to find it for yourself. Therefore, for gaining her identity, her independence, new women reject the help of men by rejecting them.

Lakshmi Sinha rightly believes that Sahgal has taken up the two images- Abla and Shakti of conventional Indian women and forms the images of Sabla in the character of Skinny Jaipal, and Sonali. Nayantara Sahgal, too remarks in the same vein in letter to Jasbir Jain:

I try to create the virtuous women - the modern Sita, if you like my women are strivers and aspirers, towards freedom, towards goodness, toward a compassionate world. There virtue is a quality of heart and mind and spirit, a kind of untouched innocence and integrity, I think there is this quality in the Indian women.

So as a writer with feminist concerns, Nayantara Sahgal is a progeny of the tradition wherein power itself is blessed as goddess 'Shakti' a female symbol. Sahgal's approach towards the issue is holistic and focuses mainly on the question of identity crisis for women. She believes:

Through the rewriting women do, new Sitas and Savitris will arise, stripped of false sanctity and crowned with the human virtue of courage. Then at last we will know why they did what they did, and how their lone, remote struggles can help our search for identity and emancipation.

In her essay *Women Persons or Possessions*, Nayantara Sahgal condemns such attitudes which value women as 'property' and discourage individuality in them: "When I heard someone remark we never allow our daughter to go out or I cannot do that, my husband would not like it, it sounded a very peculiar, alien jargon. As if I thought, women were property, not persons". Her statement shows that she is deeply concerned of individuality in women. Therefore, her virtuous fulfill her dream women in her novels. There is something distinct in the women characters of Nayantara Sahgal, something in their social and emotional make up that express it in their attitude to persons and events. In these women characters, there is a deep longing for self-fulfillment through self-expression.

The women characters of her novels are concerned with the fundamental question - the lot of women. They analyze this through the metaphors that deal with the themes of suffering, dominance, urge for companionship. Her novels from *A Time to be Happy* to *Mistaken Identity* show her deep concern with the various states of women in the patriarchal society. Her women from her prototype Maya to the mother figure Renee in *Mistaken Identity* rise against the stultifying culture which impedes women's progress and rebel against all years marks the third and the most mature phase of Sahgal's career. The women belonging to this phase are strong-willed, emotionally independent women. They refuse to bow down before the hold of men, right from the beginning. They are mistresses of indomitable spirit. And credit goes to Anna Hansen, Sonali, Rose, The Rani of Vijaygarh, Simrit and Sylla for holding the flag of new woman.

The thirst for identity is not a problem facing the Indian women only. But European women also face this problem. As we see this thing in case of Anna Hansen, in the novel *Plans for Departure*. Nayantara Sahgal's *Plans for Departure* is the story of Anna Hansen, a Danish girl. Anna is one of the three major female characters in the novel. She is also the protagonist, a person who wants to taste the essence of life in its magnificent as well as mundane aspects. It is her desire for self-realization that she postpones her marriage to an English diplomat, Nicholas. She wants to understand life and asserts her right to be authentic self. For this purpose, she embarks on travel for one year, visiting Copenhagen, London, Madras, Calcutta and finally landing in Himapur, a fictive village in the Himalayan ranges. She faces no difficulty in getting the job of a secretary-cum-companion to Sir Nitin Basu, a renowned botanist who has come to Himapur during the summer to carry on his work. Anna's involvement with the suffragettes makes her aware of both the courage and dedication needed to bring about political change, and the brutal steps those who enforce patriarchal laws are prepared to employ to prevent protest. It is this awareness which initially prompts her to learn more about Indian demands for independence. Her indomitable independence and her sense of freedom provide a striking contrast to the British imperialism and the suffocating political situation of the 1914.

In *Rich Like Us*, especially in the portrayal of Sonali Ranade, we notice the feminist in Sahgal coming of age. *Rich Like Us* coming after an interval of seven years marks the third and the most mature phase of Sahgal's career. The women belonging to this phase are strong-willed, emotionally independent women. They refuse to bow before the stranglehold of men, right from the beginning. They are mistresses of indomitable spirit. Sonali grows up with a dream to fulfill "a new tradition to create, (our) her independent worth to prove" (Sahgal 1983, 1987:28). An uncompromising administrative officer, she refuses to pretend that "the emperor's new clothes were beautiful" (28). Her survival instinct is strong and instead of giving in, she gives up. Her resignation is not her acceptance of defeat; it is rather her defiance against oppressive forces, her refusal to cringe before forces acting against her identity. It is her unique manner of asserting her individuality.

Sahgal's concept of emancipation reaches its culmination duly and justly in her last novel *Mistaken Identity*. Here 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. Talking to Jasbir Jain, Sahgal says: "She had been through agony and had no life - But her mind was free and she, you know, lived her

life” (1978, 1994:175). Sahgal’s other young and so-called emancipated women need to learn a lesson or two from their successor the Ranees, though she belongs to an age when women were expected to stay behind veil. The woman is herself confined in multiple chains. First, there is the hierarchy, then there is her wifedom to a Raja, and then again there is the veil behind which she is doomed to choke. This woman shines in the firmament of Sahgal’s fiction as the pole star, the brightest and the most firm. Here is a woman, who is living in 1920-30s, 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 are no outside forces which make her aware of this (like Vishal for Saroj), there is no one to support her in her crusade against female exploitation (like Raj for Simrit), and yet she dares to challenge the authority of her husband in his own home.

Nayantara Sahgal, though not a rebellious feminist, feels strongly about female-exploitation and male sarcasm toward the issue of women’s identity crises. She demands social justice for women, her focus being on freedom. Sahgal’s fictional women challenge the moth-eaten pretence of tradition without suffering from loss of identity. They threaten the stranglehold of men and reaffirm their faith in their potentials.

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