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Feminist Visions in the novels of Nayantara Sahgal

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Abstract

Nayantara Sahgal is a socio-feminist with a tremendous realisation of prevailing social and political conditions. Her meaning of feminism is completely based on Indian ethos. She attacks the age old notion of discrimination on the account of sexuality. Search for identity is her major concern. Her fictions are preoccupied with modern Indian woman's search for sexual freedom and self-realization. Man-woman relationship is a prominent theme of Sahgal's fictions. Nearly all the Indian English women novelists from Anita Desai to Shashi Deshpande have done so. What makes Nayantara Sahgal's voice more strident is her unhappy experiences of her married life. The typical male chauvinism that she encountered there as well as the gross injustice to women in social life that she observed made her voice loud in protest against exploitation of women. Woman has been compared to the creator and has been deified in our scriptures had actually been subjugated and maltreated in our society since ages. Man has used her, exploited her, drawn comfort, pleasure and support from her but while doing so denied her right to her own happiness and individual growth. Though submissive _ not by nature but by training _ woman tends to become defiant when her patience is taxed too long . When a woman's crusade for emancipation begins it sweeps away all that comes in the way. Nayantara focuses on the ills of patriarchal society. For man his will is his law but for woman there are certain pre-ordained moulds into which she has to fit herself or else she is crushed and finished . As a feminist Nayantara asserts the need for women to become aware of themselves as person.

Key words: Socio-feminist, self-realisation , discrimination, search for sexual freedom, Man-woman relationship, unhappy experiences of married life, male chauvinism, gross injustice to women, exploitation, maltreatment , patriarchal society, emancipation, self-awareness..

Feminist Visions in the novels of Nayantara Sahgal

Feminism is a social movement that seeks equal rights for women. Widespread concern for women's rights dates from the Enlightenment (European intellectual movement of the 17th to 18th century). It's first important expression was Mary Wollstonecraft's ' A Vindication of the Rights of Women (1792). The 1848 Seneca Falls Convention, New York, convened by Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Lucretia Mott, and others called for full legal equality with men, including full educational opportunity and equal compensation; thereafter the woman suffrage movement began to 18th century). Its ' (1792). nt began to gather momentum. From America the movement spread to Europe. American women gained the right to vote by constitutional amendment in 1920, but their participation in the workplace remained limited, and prevailing notions tended to confine women to the home. Milestones in the rise of modern

feminism included a French writer and feminist Simone de Beauvoir's 'The Second Sex' (1949) and Betty Friedan's 'The Feminine Mystique' (1963) and the founding in 1966 of the National Organisation for Women.

Post colonial period awakened the female writers to be conscious of their identity and space in an age of rootlessness, exile and displacement. Located in the margins of cultural discourse and exiled from the seamless web of domestic organisation, most women writers exerted and aspired to come out from their present space to public space for their identity.

If we look back into the history of Indian woman, we find that she has been defined and interpreted in different ways in diverse branches of knowledge. Literature and folklore portray her as a symbol of sex and domesticity, and highlight the erotic image of a woman. Through this eroticism the superiority of body has been established over mind. She has been considered a hindrance on the path of salvation. Hindu religion worships her as Kali, Saraswati and Lakshmi. The scriptures tell us that gods dwell there where woman is worshipped and respected.

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Her humiliation leads her to utter ruin. History presents woman as warrior in the form of women like Lakshmi Bai, Durgavati, and Razia Begum. The negative image of a woman has also been presented through characters like Manthara, Kaikai and Shurpanakha. However, Meerabai can be called a feminist who, for the sake of devotion, neglected the orders of the king and royal family and initiated the empowerment of women. Thus in this image making process of a woman diverse experiences such as her exploitation, torture and we can trace the discrimination were also assimilated.

We can trace the western influence in the Indian feminist writings as the concept of feminism has come from the west. Feminists believe that the work that is done by a man can also be done by a woman with the same capacity and skill. Inequity comes due to the patriarchal society that limits the creative power of a woman by assigning her domestic duties. It is apparent that the problems related to women and their uplift have been widely discussed in the Indian intellectual circles for the last few decades. The changing pattern of our democratic system has also raised the issues of equality of male female sections of society as it has been clearly realised that Indian culture is based totally on the male superiority and the subordinate status of women. With the rise of feminist movement in India the Indian English have also come up against the suppression and maltreatment of women.

Nayantara Sahgal is one such prominent Indian English novelist who has tried to redefine the traditional woman through her novels. The emergence of women novelists in Indian English literature took place as early as the last quarter of the 19th century. But it was only after the achievement of Independence that women novelists could make solid contributions in Indian English fiction. Nayantara Sahgal is one of the distinguished women novelists of the contemporary scene. She enjoys the reputation of being political novelist. Her work has a strong realistic base and reflects not only her personal value but also the changing values of a society exposed for the first time to both freedom and power. But her fiction is equally concerned with the problems of women in contemporary society. Her fiction is coloured by her personal experiences and, therefore, has strong autobiographical basis. Her initiation into the values of humanism, love and freedom, her unconventional love marriage, clash of egos and subsequent divorce -all has gone into her fiction. She, therefore, articulates her feminine sensibility and aspirations through her women characters.

Nayantara was the daughter of Vijaya Laxmi Pandit and niece of Jawaharlal Nehru. Her westernised upbringing and higher studies in America also had an impact on her emotional and mental makeup. Later on her love for and marriage with Gautam Sahgal resulted in traumatic experience. This marriage unsettled her although it was not an arranged marriage and was of her own choice. She wrote candidly about it : ' For the first time I came across the shocking assumption of inequality. A man's ego and ambition, I learned, must be served first...'¹

Along with the political theme, her fiction is also preoccupied with the modern Indian search for sexual freedom and self woman's realization. With these political themes is often combined theme of man woman relationship, their marital problems, their temperamental incompatibility, the problems arising out of their ego or submissiveness, an

d finally the problem of the place of woman in society. A feminist concern too can be seen in her novels where her women characters are victims of conventional Indian society.

Nayantara Sahgal's divorce and resettlement was also a source of emotional upheaval. Divorce was obviously not an easy decision, it amounted to an admission of failure and was a confrontation with a whole tradition where women had stayed married no matter how unhappy and confining their marriages had been. Moreover even when it finally took place in early 1967, it did not set her free. The terms of the divorce settlement were harsh and involved a heavy responsibility for taxes eliminating all her capacity to earn for herself. Some relief from the economic burden was offered along with an imposition on her freedom to marry again. Obviously public opinion and the law both saw nothing wrong in it This became theme of 'The Day in Shadow ' which is the most personal of all her novels. Just as Simrit decides to go ahead with Raj in the novel, Nayantara Sahgal also decided to make a life with Nirmal Mangat Rai, a Punjabi Christian who was an Indian Civil Service officer, without the conventional prop of marriage. Because her personal expfiction, it is rooted in authenticity.

From the viewpoint of the problems of women , "A Time to be Happy", Nayantara Sahgal's first novel, starts a process which becomes recurring theme of her fiction. As a woman novelist and as a human being, Nayantara Sahgal is deeply concerned with the need for freedom for women to become aware of themselves as individuals. Kusum, the heroine of "A Time to be Happy", starts this process. The novelist does not view her women characters as wage earners or career women but mainly women _ as wives, daughters and mother, and it is in these roles that they wish to experience freedom and to become aware of themselves as individuals and desire to be accepted as equals. In " A Time to be Happy " all the women are viewed in the perspective of marriage. Except for Kusum's marriage to other marriages in this novel are arranged ones but these are not necessarily happy ones.

As in "A Time to be Happy", in " This Time of Morning" too Nayantara Sahgal is concerned with women , but whereas in "A Time to be Happy" she is concerned with self expression within marriage, in "This Time of Morning", she focuses on the kind of freedom young women desire outside marriage. Nita and Rashmi are both very different from Maya and Kusum and are the products of changed social conditions. They are not intended to be passively docile, instead want to live their own lives. Rashmi with an unhappy marriage behind her gropes for feeling and freedom. Rakesh finds her unnaturally subdued. He feels that she looked displaced. It was marriage, then, that had altered her, made her a moth trapped in cement. Nayantara Sahgal typifies the emergence of the new woman in Nita.

The rise of feminism is undeniably one of the major events in the development of literary criticism this century. Feminist approaches have pushed forward both the theory of literary criticism and understanding of individual works of literature. Since ages woman has been the victim of male domination and oppression. She has always been treated like a commodity. Man has always looked down upon her as the weaker sex. The religions of the world have given sanction to the females subjugation to the males. The Bible clearly tells : " Wives, submit yourselves to your husbands as to the Lord." In the Bible at various places the superiority of man over woman is stressed. Adam is shown as the master who gives names to all beasts and animals and he also gives name to his wife and calls her Eve in the Biblical myth. Man has been made master of all and he rules over controls every object on this earth including woman. St. Paul also gives a secondary position to woman.

According to Manu a wife must ever remain devoted to her husband and always please him while he is alive. After his death she would never think of any other man. The position of woman has been equated with Shudras and like them women are denied various religious privileges. Traditionally a " good woman" is always synonymous with good wife and a good wife must be chaste and faithful like Sita or Savitri. Sita's image as mother is glorified and she is repeatedly referred as Sita Mata but as a wife she is subjected to the whims of her husband who abandons her only because of the derogatory remarks of a commoner. However one finds that Sita shows some sign of awareness of being wronged, refuses to go back to Rama and finally takes refuge in the lap of mother earth.

In " Storm in Chandigarh " Sahgal has taken the division of Punjab into two states of Punjab and Haryana as a background. With great finesse, she knits this political background with the emotional and matrimonial problems of the two unhappy married young couples , Inder Mara and Ji story of the and Saroj. This novel is the tale of city torn by divided political loyalty and young hearts broken up by compulsions of matrimony and call a new found love.

In "A Situation in New Delhi " Sahgal seems to be bound within the customary ambit , namely woman in relation to men in her life. The novel deals with violence to a greater extent than any other, and it includes a description of sex which, while not by any means strong by contemporary standards, a new element in Sahgal's writing.

Nayantara Sahgal is one of the best socio enlightening and thought provoking. Her concept of feminism is he is authentic and vivid in providing an overview of Indian urban culture with all its inherent contradictions. She not only evokes 'outer reality ' but also the subtle perception of ' inner reality'. She has profound imaginative skill and creative resources in transforming her fiction into a vehicle of human sensibility. Every novel of Nayantara Sahgal is an attempt to discover oneself. As the character in Nayantara Sahgal's novels are on discovery mission, the writer too is on ' know thyself mission'. The struggle for individual freedom begins the moment the characters in her novels realise they are not in tune with life. In all her novels Sahgal reveals her chief character fighting bravely against repressive forces _ political and otherwise. The outside forces do harass her characters but at the end these characters do not emerge as weeping dolls . She is a novelist of great vision with a tremendous concern for ' New India ' .

Nayantara writes only about the felt experiences. She doesn't go to rural background in search of her themes. She has urban roots. She writes about the characters she knows personally. The social realities are ingrained in her psyche. She is disturbed at the scenario of post colonial India. During Emergency when most of the writers and journalists were bending at the authoritarian rule, she takes a bold stand and writes an anti establishment novel like " Rich Like Us". In " Rich Like Us " she has depicted the erosion of crisis in human values in great deal. All her novels are political, yet she views freedom in all its meanings and manifestations and women, she finds, are cramped in every sphere by conventions. .

Nayantara Sahgal emphasises the need for sex education and self respect for a change in the social customs and attitudes. Women are also individuals and marriage is a partnership not an institution. But the whole social set up is geared towards the domination of men over women _ in marriage, in sexual relationships , in childbirth and even in adultery it is the woman who is victimized. This is fully illustrated in Sahgal's novels. The day women are accepted as equal partners, a new age would begin. Their emancipation bases itself on the ordinary assumption that a woman's body is all her own and she after has her own thinking on issues related to her. If the participation on women in social and national life is to be of any value, it has to be on the basis of their own individuality and not as labelled possessions.

Like Jane Austen , Nayantara Sahgal's world is limited in the sense that she confines herself to urban classes and areas. She has also not attempted any serious experimentation with techniques and has no pretensions in philosophical writing. Her novels are in the realistic framework and within this or innovation . limitation , she has explored the necessity of morality in politics. Ideas are important to her and not locale .

The concern of feminism is the need of society where women have been colonized by men on account of sexuality. Nayantara Sahgal unravels the maxim of freedom in the context of feminism of Indian sensibility. She has many disturbing questions to deal with, the agony and pain of women in her novels. She is deeply concerned with the need for freedom of women to become aware of themselves as individuals, society has normally denied them . The process of awareness begun unconsciously by Kusum in " A Time to be Happy " is consciously realised only by Saroj and Simrit in her later novels. The process has been painful and slow one for women as they have had to overcome not only social opinion and orthodoxy but also personal hesitation and reluctance.

Nayantara does not view her women characters as wage married women, as wives, daughters and mothers, and it is in earners or career women but mainly as these roles that they wish to experience independence and to become aware of themselves as individuals and to be accepted as equals. . Marriage which has been as traditional basis for man woman relationship may or may not provide the conditions necessary for individual growth. Arranged marriages ensured a minimum affinity of background but this was in no way an assurance of happiness. Gouri in " Storm in Chandigarh" feels secure in the knowledge that an arranged marriage has saved her from emotional upheavals and clashes. In " Storm in Chandigarh " Nayantara says : . " There's only one safety in India, for some time to come, and that is to marry in your own state into a background you thoroughly understand... that kind of a things endures ."2 Nayantara Sahgal believes in the virtue of male female equality and corresponding balance in nature. That is what Lawrence calls "polarity between the sexes " . . Women have been used since ages. Women have been resenting it because no body wants to be used. Therefore ' marriage' has become an ugly word in her novels. Woman has suffered tremendous abuse and condemnation. Just to survive has distanced her from her roots and now the time has come to rebel _ to take a stand. .

In almost every novel Nayantara has a central woman character who gradually moves towards an awareness of her emotional needs and reflects the writer's own life and sensibility like Kusum, Rashmi, Saroj and Simrit. There are some women who are victims of oppression like Uma in " This Time of Morning ", and Leela Dubey in "Storm in Chandigarh". They are victims of a social system which leaves no scope for their individuality. But they fight the system in their own way. Nayantara believes that liberation should come from within. Freedom may be expressed as defiance of convention but is at heart refusal to tolerate injustice. And self awareness on the part of woman automatically changes the basis of man woman relationship making it a more equal one. Her women characters in their search for self expression and freedom do not turn sexual instead they transform sex into a multi relationship. It appears that sexual relationship in her novels have become acts of non-- dimensional conformity and are free from moral under or over tones. Sex has ceased to be merely an appetite and this becomes a fulfilment and a renewal. Nayantara seeks to reinterpret the rigid concepts of virtue and chastity through her women characters who have a kind of 'untouched innocence and integrity'.

The collapse of matrimonial alliance and disharmony and incompatibility in marriage becomes one of major themes in her novels. In her novels sex is not as pronounced as in the novels of Shobha Dey and Khushwant Singh but she has discussed sex in a subdued and mature style. Sex depiction in her novels is not erotic but rather disturbing. Sex should be a sharing between the two souls, she believes. In a male chauvinistic society women are always dominated by male. They have no choice , they have to submit to wills of man. It is a fact that a girl child is not welcome in Indian homes. She is provided with less food with lots of restrictions. Women continue to be burnt for dowry. In tribal areas the woman not wanted for various other reasons are branded as witches and butchered.

Nayantara Sahgal describes marriage as a ' life long damage ' , if the other person is not sensitive enough. Marriage opens up a whole range of demands of motherhood and sacrifice. The heroines in the novels of Nayantara Sahgal prove that marriage, despite its many failings has in it seeds of starting life afresh. Simrit does show this in " The Day in Shadow " . Simrit and Som part company and Simrit does live separately to see new man in her life. Saroj in " Storm in Chandigarh " leaves her unreasonable and unfaithful husband. Devi in " A Situation in New Delhi " chooses to live her own way.

If marriage was distasteful to th longs for love in the man e novelist the divorce was equally ' flesh bleeding ' . Nayantara woman relationship. For her love is the most important thing in life. In one of her interviews she says : " I believe that there are fundamental differences of emphasis between Indian feminism and western feminism, and the issues are very different. Feminism in India is making a tremendous impact with less noise and drama than in the west. As far as my fiction is concerned , I feel Indian women are conditioned to stay but in the home, no matter what difficulties they face. They find it extremely difficult to break family ties. " 3.

Nayantara advocates for the freedom , self identity but she is conservative at heart. She is deeply rooted in Indian tradition. She uses Gandhian method of passive resistance. She says : " In my usage ' passive ' has an active meaning just as nonviolence has an active meaning. And my heroines such as Saroj and Simrit hold their patience until the time when living together with their husbands is impossible and revolt can no longer be avoided. When

critical moment comes they take the final step and just walk out, although the action entails walking into the unknown." 4.

Nayantara is aware of the victimization of women. She has been aware of the fact that her own great grand mother was burnt as 'Sati'. But she is conscious of the fact that modern Indian women are strong and self respecting. She believes that unless women are liberated, the nation can't expect to be free. On sex she is a firm believer that it is a communion of souls and ultimately love is a mystical experience. Sex has to be respected. The women in Nayantara Sahgal's novels are no longer caged birds _ but rather they have come out of the cage singing songs of love.

Nayantara Sahgal depicts her women characters with a lot of passion who are suffering due to sexual bias in male dominated society. The women characters in most of the novels of Nayantara Sahgal feel that they are being simply used as a piece of furniture. Marriage becomes a sort of solitary confinement of the human spirit. What force the conventional security of marriage is their yearning for a free communication of ideas, union of two human minds. Nayantara's women characters are educated and aware persons. They do not subscribe to the male chauvinistic theory of being exclusive private properties. Nayantara Sahgal is firm in her conviction that women cannot be taken as a 'sex object'.

Her women characters represent the Indian feminism in the true sense of the term. To her marriage without love and self identity is meaningless. Nayantara Sahgal is quite bold in her feminist approach. She dismantles the age old notions of being inferior. She is one novelist who is quite clear in her perception that man relationship should be based on equality, understanding and love. Man love is prostitution and nothing else. Sahgal also demolishes the woman relationship without old Hindu myth that husbands should be treated as God. In a letter she throws light on her women characters : . " I try to create the virtuous woman _ the modern Sita, if you like. My women are strivers and aspirers, towards freedom, towards goodness, towards a compassionate world. Their virtue is a quality of heart and mind and spirit, a kind of untouched innocence and integrity."5. .

For Nayantara Sahgal 'The New Woman' is determined to live in self-respect. She is no more the four walls wailing and crying and waiting for the husband. She is no more 'Sati'. According to her point of view the perception of morality is quite different on love ethics. Like Lawrence she believes that sex outside marriage may be a taboo but such relationship should be viewed with reference to a particular situation. It has to be contextual. Nayantara Sahgal attacks as the century old institution of marriage as epicenter of a woman's life without which she has no social identity and dignity. Feminism to her doesn't mean giving up femininity but a passion for equality and fairness. Nayantara maintains that woman is not a bonded labourer to be sold daily. The woman is not a slave. The success of marriage depends on mutual compassion and understanding. .

In scriptures and myths woman is depicted either as a goddess or a subhuman creature never as a complete human being. On the one hand she has been described as an object of reverence or worship, on the other hand she is treated like an object of sexual gratification and considered to be man's property. In every age the recurrent symbol of seed and earth further degrades her position. On the surface she enjoys a very high status and is known as Devi Goddess Lakshmi but in real life she is harassed, oppressed and tortured in various ways. All the negative qualities are assigned to her. The position of woman is changing steadily and they are taking part in the affairs of the world, but even today this world belongs to man. .

The woman is often 'marginalized', 'repressed' or 'silenced' in literary works. Hence Feminist criticism seeks reinterpretation of the works of earlier authors of both sexes in order to expose misconceptions and culturally conditioned responses. Feminist writers correctly reject the age old belief that male experience is the universal norm and refuses to see the female experience as 'peripheral'. Women's oppression is not only due to individual male violence but it is based on the patriarchal structure of society. .

The personal sufferings and traumas, besides intolerable humiliations find a place in many of the novels of Nayantara Sahgal. Though her marriage with Gautam Sahgal crumbled, Nayantara was no less wiser from this experience. " For the first time I came across the shocking assumption of inequality", she further learnt " a man's ego and ambition must be served first." This awful lesson was new to her. She was not groomed to tolerate or

brook any inequality. Unlike Anita Desai's women characters Nayantara Sahgal's characters especially women do not commit suicide. They go or opt for new settlements. They start life afresh. .

In " Rich Like Us " , Sonali refuses to be pinned down to marriage. She craves for higher studies and goes abroad to escape the harshness of marriage. But incidents and events does her life more pains than joys. In Nayantara's novels not all husbands have been shown as all barbaric, uncouth and ruthless. Sahgal's women suffer a different kind of atrocities. They are made emotional sufferer. This is resented by Sahgal's women protagonists. .

Nayantara Sahgal has been championing that a woman is not an object, a commodity. Women are the first victim of fundamentalism, be it of Islam, Hinduism, Christianity or Sikhism. Fundamentalism breeds on the forces of religion and tradition and these forces act as chains on women. If marriage was distasteful to the novelist , the divorce was equally a torn flesh , bleeding. Nayantara Sahgal is a socio feminist with a tremendous realisation of prevailing social and political conditions. Her meaning of feminism is completely based on Indian ethos. She wants her women to assert themselves who have been colonized by men from time immemorial. She is aware of the roles assigned to women but she attacks the age old notion of discrimination on the account of sexuality . Search for identity is her major concern. She rebels against the rotten society because it is devoid of a dream. She determined the feminist conscio usness through various themes in her novels.

Nayantara Sahgal, a courageous woman writer in Indian English , with bold approach and rebellious intent wants the Indian women to be free from chains. Her novels have golden touch of feminine spi rit. She has given her women a ' voice ' with primal intense energy. Nayantara Sahgal's women are not hostile to men, but they would certainly not settle for a subordinate position. They are not ready to compromise though they do not hesitate to adjust. Sahgal tries to make plainly clear that no relation is good or bad in itself ; it has to be free from all labels. Even extramarital and premarital relations are not entirely immoral if they tend to fulfil the person as individual . That which saps individuals of their individuality is immoral and that which cures them of all frustrations is wholesome and ethical. Nayantara Sahgal had not experienced any stark discrimination against women when she was a child. The Nehru family to which her mother belonged w as known for its liberal and humanitarian values . Her father too was a broad minded man who gave all freedom to his wife . When Nayantara married, she encountered the male chauvinistic attitude for the first time. As a novelist she saw all around her women being exploited and treated inhumanly. She could not bear this unjust treatment of women and came out strongly against it both in her writings and personal and social life. She became what is today called feminist, championing the cause of women.

Sahgal's women from "A Time to be Happy" to "Mistaken Identity" portray women's struggle against subversive forces and continue their journey towards self discovery. This search for identity begins with her very first novel. "Storm in Chandigarh" is a statement on the need to redefine virtue and morals. The protagonist proves for the first time that women have a right to live as they wish to. Simrit in "The Day in Shadow" is a projection of Sahgal Sahgal's search for herself and her search for identity runs parallel to assertion. Sahgal's " Plans for Departure " is primarily a woman's story. The protagonist Anna Hansen faces ' identity crisis ' _ which is the tragedy of woman in a male society. dominated In " Mistaken Identity " the protagonist is a male, nonetheless the Feminist zeal of the novelist has not died down. The conscience of Bhushan Singh, the protagonist is dominated by two important women in his life Razia and the Ranee of Vijaygarh who is his mother.

A professed feminist Nayantara Sahgal's journey as a woman writer starts from the search for selfhood and reaches its culmination in the attainment of it. She has a humanitarian dislike of suffering and inequality. She is sensit ive to the suffering of Indian women and champions their cause.

Thus Nayantara Sahgal's novels are set against the socio they deal with man's quest for his identity, man-- political backdrop of the country while woman relationship , East West encounter and preoccupation with Hindus and Hinduism. In a nutshell, Nayantara's novels are microcosm of life itself, the life which she keenly perceived around her.

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