



About Us: <http://www.the-criterion.com/about/>

Archive: <http://www.the-criterion.com/archive/>

Contact Us: <http://www.the-criterion.com/contact/>

Editorial Board: <http://www.the-criterion.com/editorial-board/>

Submission: <http://www.the-criterion.com/submission/>

FAQ: <http://www.the-criterion.com/fa/>



ISSN 2278-9529
Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal
www.galaxyimrj.com

Towards Freedom and Self Assertion: A Study of Women Characters in Nayantara Sahgal's Selected Novels

Dr. Monita Saluja

Asst Professor,
Dept. of English, Public College,
Samana.(Punjab)

A number of women novelists are set out making new forays into the world of women. Women writers like R.P. Jhabvala, Nayantara Sahgal, Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Arunadhathi Roy, Bharathi Mukherjee, Jhumpa Lahiri and Manju Kapur have heralded new consciousness, particularly the pathetic plight of the Indian women. Nayantara Sahgal's novels bring out her feminist concerns. Her leanings towards feminism are quite marked in her novels. Besides politics, her fiction also focusses attention on Indian woman's search for freedom and self-realisation. The post-independence period witnessed a welcome change in the growth of women from being a docile, domestic, passive species to a reasonable, analysing, educated individual who can take independent decisions not only for herself, but also for others. As a women novelist, Sahgal recognises that her primary obligation is that of advocating the emancipation of women. For her analysis she chooses the sample from those sections of society with which she has the closest association—the world of politicians, bureaucrats, businessmen and the diplomatic manoeuvres. Nayantara Sahgal shows a deep and abiding faith in individual freedom. In novel after novel, she deals with the theme of liberation of the individual and elaborates it against the background of nations strength to achieve independence and safeguard the same.

Almost in all her novels, Sahgal has gone deep into the female psyche. In almost every novel, Nayantara has a central woman character who gradually moves towards an awareness of her emotional needs. Her portrayal of women characters in the novels invariably bears authenticity to her feminist approach, outlook and perspective. In her novels, Sahgal's characters suffer from the torment of broken marriages and loneliness. Suffering and frustration in marriage sometimes cause disintegration and make women rebellious. Sahgal's women are well aware of the ill treatment they have to undergo in the society. Some of them are driven to committing suicide or seeking divorce and undergo torments, but there is another section of women who come out of this traditional bond. Her women respond fearlessly and intelligently to the challenges being faced by them in the patriarchal society they live in and most of them are seen to be engaged in a movement towards self-realisation and self-assertion. The present paper is an attempt to study those women who don't yield and give up but decide to build up another world and move towards freedom and self assertion.

Sahgal in her novels delineates with keen perception and sensibility the problems and suffering of women in marriage, who feel trapped, oppressed and doomed to take care of husband and home, and show their reaction. Some of these women accept their faith unhesitatingly, but most of them gasp for freedom, and gradually reject the stereotype by going in for separation or for divorce to live a meaningful life. Most of Sahgal's women

refuse to accept the polarisation of sexes. They do not want to define themselves in relation to men and hence seek identity and individuality in their own way. When they realise that they are being used and used, they turn subversive of the tradition of being submissive and conforming persons, asserting their individuality and 'consciousness' which are prerequisite for women's liberation.

Most of Sahgal's women suffer from mental agony of the broken marriage and so they search for meaningful relationships in the form of remarriage or a relationship outside marriage. Rashmi, saroj, simrit finally emerge as free women. Maya and Kusum in 'A time to be happy' are submissive. Maya suffers in marriage and endures an emotional isolation in marital life. She neither revolts nor succumbs to her destiny rather sets about building another world which can give her some satisfaction. Kusum's marriage to Sanad is a half way between the two worlds of the orthodoxy and freedom. Nita and Rashmi in 'This Time of the Morning' are depicted as young women who desire freedom outside marriage. They are products of the changed social conditions. Their attitude is quite different from that of Maya and Kusum. In the character of Nita, Sahgal explores the place of a woman in Indian society before marriage. Nita is young, beautiful daughter of Dr. Narang, who is queer blend of eastern and western culture. While western lifestyle – drinks, dance and bridge- is part of his culture. When it comes to his daughter, he would act in the most traditional manner, imposing severe restrictions on the movement of his ambitious daughter. 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 daughters to go out or I can't do that, my husband would not like it , it sounded a very peculiar alien jargon. As if, I thought , women were property, not persons."

Nita objects to arranged marriage, when Nita's parents want to settle down their daughter in marriage and wash their hands of her. They do not give importance to the wishes of their daughter and force her to marry the man of their choice whom she neither loves nor admires. So when she is engaged to Vijay, she is unhappy. She feels that such a marriage will not provide her with emotional security. Vijay her prospective husband sees her as a possession rather than an individual with personal ideas and attitude. Nita finds no prospects of fulfilment for herself in her marriage with vijay. She gets involved with an elderly man ,Kalyan. She finds a strange comfort in his company and visits him frequently. Nita's pre marital involvement is not the result of the western liberated lifestyle : it is an attempt to fulfil her inner desires for love and communication. As Jasbir Jain opines about Nita's sexual involment with Kalyan : "With Kalyan Sinha sex comes naturally to her not because he loves her but because she has unconsciously allowed herself to love and admire him and turn to him in her desperation at being hedged in by conventions." Though Nita is engaged, emotionally she is still dependent on Kalyan : "You gave the freedom to be myself, I had never had that before. I'd never have known it but for you." (This Time of the Morning ,219) Through the character of Nita,Sahgal seems to be exposing conventional narrow minded Indian society, where life partners are chosen by the parents, the parents arrange for the two

young souls to live happily ever after. Sahgal strongly attacks this social convention and names this kind of marriage “just organised rape” (This Time of the Morning ,71)

In almost every novel, Sahgal is preoccupied with individual’s search for freedom and self realisation. Her fictional work is a thoroughly integrated system of values focused on the concept of freedom as a fundamental significance to the peace and progress of the human spirit. She concedes that all progress whether political or social is possible in an atmosphere of freedom and where people can communicate on all fronts. Freedom of individual and freedom of India emerge as twin themes in the fictional world of Nayantara Sahgal. She deals with marital and political crisis alongside, crumbling politics and crumbling marriages take the centre of her fictional matrix.

In the novel ‘ Storm in Chandigarh’, Sahgal’s third fictional work, the expression “storm” works at two levels in the novel. One the political, following on the partition of Punjab into two states, and two the personal or emotional crisis in the marital conflicts that a husband can cause violence to his wife or vice versa. Sahgal is deeply concerned with unhappy marriages and the loneliness of living. Saroj, who has been brought up in the liberal atmosphere of freedom expects equality within marriage. She is greatly surprised by her husband’s violent reactions to a premarital affair, she had had in her college days. Inder is obsessed and could not forgive this act of Saroj and constantly exploits her sense of innocence. It is ironical that Inder considers it to be a serious moral lapse while he himself carries an extra marital affair with his children’s teacher, Mara. Saroj became a victim of the male tyranny. Saroj however is not really guilty. She thinks it is a part of her growing up. For saroj is warmly involved in her marriage, Inder fails to maintain a genuine partnership with Saroj. She learns the value of freedom from Dubey during their lonely walks : “ life, Dubey told her was bigger than any system. Life could remould or break the system that lacked righteousness and reason. It was life’s precious obligation to rebel, and humanity’s right to be free to choose from the best light it could see, not necessarily the long-accepted light.” (Storm in Chandigarh ,193)

Inder shows a lot of indifference towards her and has no time for emotional involvement. The gulf gradually becomes wider in Saroj-Inder relationship. He is aggressive in nature, and treats her merely as a “possession”. Their relationship ceases to be a union of communication. Even his brief affair with Mara comes to an end. Mara’s self assertion and individuality disgusts him. He feels that man’s relationship with woman will always be one of domination. “a thousand years from now a woman will still want and need a master, the man who will own and command her- and that’s the man she will respect” (Storm in Chandigarh ,104)

Nodoubt Saroj is too willing to accept her role as a wife and does not want to seek anything outside marriage, but, at the same time she also wants to seek equality, continuity and involvement. Inder’s indifferent and harden behaviour forces Saroj to realise the need to assert her individuality and she, “...revolts against the established norms by leaving a marriage that had become an emotional wasteland for her.”(Storm in Chandigarh ,89) Saroj’s departure is a move towards personal freedom and the rejection of role thrust upon her. Saroj’s departure from her home is an initiation towards personal freedom of the New woman.

Like in her earlier novels, Nayantara Sahgal in 'The day in shadow', deals with the struggle of Simrit who is ahead of Saroj and not only leaves her husband and home but also is presented as a daring Indian woman trapped under the burden of a brutal divorce settlement. The novel presents the struggle of a young and beautiful woman who experiences unhappiness and agony in the hands of unjust and cruel male dominated society. Nayantara Sahgal seems to be deeply concerned with the need of freedom for women. Kusum, Saroj, and now Simrit and Pixie in this novel want to stand on their own feet and enjoy individuality, self expression and self dependence. It is Simrit's longing for freedom and individuality that urges her to take divorce from her husband. She doesn't want to be known as her husband's wife but as her own self.

Women are still regarded as servile creatures by people like Som, Sumer Singh, Lali and many others. They are regarded as belonging to the sphere of sex and procreation. Men like Som expect them to live under their control. Simrit is an educated woman who yearns for a free communication of idea with her husband but feels ignored like a piece of furniture used only for physical comfort whenever needed by Som. She wants freedom, love, warmth and understanding but Som never understands her. Simrit is fed up with this life which Som wants to compensate with money and takes divorce from her husband. This courage shows the emergence of the new Simrit who is able to make choices, take decisions and regard herself as a person.

An analysis of Sahgal's novels presents makes it clear that Sahgal's women make every possible effort to compromise and strengthen their relationship. They try to adjust and reconcile but when their individuality and self respect are denied, they exhibit rare courage. They don't feel guilty in breaking up the traditional bonds by the society and also in establishing them as independent women, firm in their values seeking justice, identity and equality with men. Though Sahgal's women are subject to various socio-personal pressures, they don't withdraw into a cocoon. Instead, they make every effort to belong to the main stream of life. In portraying these spirited woman Sahgal evidently wants to convey that conscious efforts to liberate themselves must be made by woman. No one will make it easy for them.

Works Cited:

Anita Mahajan, "The Day in Shadow" A study, Indian women novelists ed- R. K Dhawan, Set II: Vol V (New Delhi : Prestige, 1993) 15, Page.15.

Jasbir Jain, "The Aesthetics of Morality: Sexual Relations in the Novels of Nayantara Sahgal", The journal of Indian writings in English, 6, No.1(January.1978), P.42.

Nayantara Sahgal, "Women: Persons or Possessions", Hindustan Times(Sunday Magazine), P.68.

Nayantara Sahgal, "This Time of Morning" (1965, rpt, Delhi: Orient Paperbacks, 1970).

Nayantara Sahgal, "A Situation in New Delhi", (London: Magazine editions ,1977)P.25.

Nayantara Sahgal, "Storm in Chandigarh", (New Delhi: Penguin,1988).