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## **A Fine Synthesis between Tradition and Modernity: A Study of Nayantara Sahgal's Female Characters**

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### **Abstract:**

Nayantara Sahgal's works deal with the plight and subjugation of married women in patriarchal Indian society. They offer us a study of how Indian women assert their freedom and independence when they are denied their independent existence and space in marriage and not recognized as equal partners in their relationships with their husbands. She shows them struggling and fighting for their freedom and independence. They attempt to liberate themselves from the clutches of regressive mindset of their partners even sometimes by walking out of the caged marriage if it fails to recognize them as equal partners. As a champion of the freedom and independence of women and an advocate for their rights as individual beings with their own minds and bodies, she brings in her fiction the idea of 'virtuous woman' which stand for independence, freedom and revolt against the social taboos and unreasonable codes of morality which hamper the growth of woman as an independent being.

**Keywords: Tradition, Patriarchy, Modernity, Feminism, Freedom, Independence,**

### **Introduction:**

Nayantara Sahgal was born in a family that was at the centre of politics and freedom movement. Since her early childhood, she was exposed to liberal and democratic ideals. She learnt the liberal ideas and democratic temperament from her early childhood and developed a kind of conviction toward free ideas and nourished these ideals during her stay as a student in the USA for higher studies.

True to her ideas and personality, her fiction deals with India's elite responding to the crises engendered by political change'. Almost her all works deal with the political upheavals, turmoils, erosion of democratic values and how does all this dilution in constitutional and democratic values affect the life of individuals living in that background. Her fiction offers us a clear view of how the personal agenda of the politicians after Nehruvian era take precedence over the vision of our freedom fighters and constitutional forefathers. Her works have a tinge of sarcasm and are harshly critical of the undemocratic and unconstitutional moves by the politicians. She not only appreciates but glorifies and idealizes also the vision of Gandhi and Nehru and all those who drafted the constitution for a better and welfare society placing women

at the centre stage enshrining their rights in the constitution and recognizing them as equals in all sphere of public life.

### **Status of Women before and after Independence**

After the Independence, the Indian writers brought about a shift in their focus from the issues of effects of colonization and identity toward modernizing people and bringing out the society from the stereotypes and traditions. The women writers called into question the stereotypes, subordinate and subservient position of women and unjust codes of morality designed for women by the patriarchal society. They questioned the prominent old patriarchal domination. They called into question the stereotyped images of women, male dominance, inequality between male and female. As a result, today fiction by women writers constitutes a major part of Indian literature. Women writings reveal a different world thereby putting before us an alternative narrative from their own perspectives. The works of Kamla Markandaya, Nayantara Sahgal, Anita Desai, Geetha Hariharan, Shashi Deshpande, Kiran Desai and Manju Kapur and many more have left an indelible imprint on the readers of Indian fiction in English.

Confining our discussion to Nayantara Sahgal, we make an attempt here to understand how her female characters responded and reacted to this phenomenon of change. How do they negotiate with the idea of change, reject it or try to reconcile and adopt a middle path between tradition and modernity in their journey toward selfhood and self exploration? How do they negotiate with various other issues, religious, social, political, domestic, patriarchal mindset and regressive minds of their husbands in their attempts towards self discovery and self identity? How they managed to cope up with the seemingly constant tussle between tradition, patriarchal codes of morality, liberal and rational values particularly in terms of freedom, independence and liberty? How do her female characters respond to the situation? Do they challenge and defy the social taboos or remain passive sufferers when the very institution of marriage seems to have denied them their independent existence and free space? If they look for some other way outside marriage when their caged marriage fails to fulfill their romanticized dreams and even refuse to acknowledge their freedom and accept them as equal partners?

### **Female are Modern and Male are steeped in Patriarchy and Tradition**

Nayantara Sahgal's works shows how even educated husbands continue to refuse to accept women as equals with equal status. Her male characters are all from upper strata of the society like her own husband. They do not come out of stereotyped images of women, conservative views, socially assigned role of male and female. On the other hand, her female characters are modern and always in search of freedom and independence. They are in quest of equality and never accept any subservient role in their relationships with their husbands. They always run for self exploration and self discovery. In *Storm in Chandigarh*, Inder's words "A thousand years from now a woman will still want and need a master, the man who will own and

command her---and that is the man she will respect” (92) speaks volumes of the mentality of the male characters of her works and the society they come from.

The theme of ‘tradition and modernity’ is one of the recurring themes in Indian fiction. Almost all writers writing at the time of independence had to confront with this tussle between tradition and modernity when India was standing at the crossroad of change after it got free from the colonizers. The colonization of the country and English education had exposed major part of Indian population to the liberal ideas and modern temperament. This brought about a change in their outlooks, attitudes, and worldviews and above all how they looked upon this world.

But it was a change which was welcomed by a very limited part of Indian population as the opposition and resistance to the foreign yoke in the first quarter of the twentieth century had turned Indians against the British and against everything the British stood for. Thus, only those who were educated abroad or were directly associated with the English rule could only undergo a change of outlook and modern temperament. Lack of education particularly English, overwhelming influence of religion and people’s love for their local culture and tradition has hampered the access of liberal ideas to the masses.

Nayantara Sahgal, in her works, sees traditions in two related ways. In its generally accepted sense, it refers to Hinduism which represents a set of beliefs and practices which determine the mental makeup of the individuals in India. Tradition, in this sense, is responsible for social rituals and finally for how individuals, particularly women, behave and conduct their affairs within the family in a marriage and in all social occasions. However, in Sahgal's world of fiction, people have their own attitudes toward politics because they inherited certain ideals and values from their national struggle for freedom. This tradition is formed of the combined legacy of Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru. In this meaning of tradition there is Gandhian emphasis on truth, nonviolence, satyagraha, social justice, prayer, poverty, simplicity, and so on, and the Nehruvian emphasis on socialism, democracy and progress.

Besides these two, this there is a third realm which is greatly influence by the question of tradition and modernity. This is related to the life choices, likes and preferences, values and ambitions of the characters as they are revealed in their personal relationships. Without examining these three strands of traditions, we cannot form any opinion of how she synthesizes and bring about reconciliation between tradition and modernity (Paranjape)

The story of India itself is the story of tradition and modernity. When measured against our own past, we seem to be modern enough. But if we measure ourselves against the West, we are too much a traditional society particularly in terms of how our own choices and preferences encroach upon the private life of others particularly women as life partners. It shows our lack of respect for the personal and individual life of others. Even today Indian women remain fettered to the chains of patriarchy and divisions of sphere between males and females. We will try to

understand tradition and modernity by confining our discussion to women and how we as a society refuse to accept them as equals in our relationships.

### **Nayantara Sahgal's Idea of Freedom of Women is Non-Negotiable**

What is non-negotiable in her view is the freedom, independence and equal status of woman in society. Her female characters are victims of the patriarchy and she invests them with courage and conviction to break free from clutches of patriarchy and regressive minds of their husbands. She is all about freedom and individual existence of woman as equal partner. She though respects religion and the freedom to practice it as a faith and even appreciates social rituals but allow neither of them to dilute this freedom or dominate the life of man in any way. She does not want her women to be identified with their husbands and exhorts them to establish their own identity. Her concern for independent existence and self identity of women almost echoes Chaman Nahal:

I define feminism as a mode of existence in which the woman is free of the dependence syndrome. There is dependence syndrome whether it is husband, father, the community or a religious group. When women will free themselves of the dependence syndrome and lead a normal life, my idea of feminism materializes. (17)

### **A Fine Reconciliation and Synthesis between Tradition and Modernity**

A close look at her works reveals her balanced and moderate approach. She is neither a fully conformist and nor non-conformist. She does not reject religion but accepts its teachings if they are rational and reasonable. She stands for reconciliation and fine synthesis between tradition and modernity. She maintains a fine balance between these two extremes. She searches for reason, rationality and a scientific explanation of things. She neither rejects what we inherit nor blindly accepts it. She chooses from tradition what is rational and good and leaves what is bad and irrational. She does not believe that everything in our traditional values is useless but even rejects from modernity which is against human nature and reason. Jasbir Jain writes, "There is much in tradition which she values and a great deal in modernity which she rejects." (33)

She asks for it to be judged by applying our rational faculties. Her words, "So I cannot believe in Hinduism, whatever Hinduism might be. Not because of such evils as sati, but because evil is not explained" (170) speaks volume of how she judges things by applying the yard stick of logic. She launches a crusade against the patriarchal mindset and parochial society in which women are considered subservient to their husbands. She challenges this gender biased tradition and seeks equal status, freedom and an independent existence for her female characters. She rejects the patriarchal division of spheres between male and female and brings out women from domestic

spheres to public ones where they could perform in public life as per their wishes. In the last chapter of what was the first book on Sahgal (1976), A. V. Krishna Rao addresses himself to this question of tradition and modernity:

She dives deep into the sustaining springs of the composite cultural tradition of India and comes up to affirm that aspect of Indian tradition which possesses and promises a survival value. She is thus neither an out-and-out conformist nor a thoroughbred nonconformist. She is neither too submissive to the dictates of an orthodox tradition nor too much in love with revolutionary romanticism. She accepts the composite character of the Indian tradition and affirms its catholicity which allows for the human being maximum freedom. (91,92)

In *Rich Like Us* the character of Sonali stands for, rational, reasonable and in Sahgal's own words a virtuous woman who represents the best of modern India and also the Indian womanhood. She combines and synthesizes the finest Indian traditions with the ideal aspects of modernity. She represents the awakening sense of Indian womanhood. She combines the finest Indian traditions with the positive and intellectual aspects of modernity. She possesses indomitable courage and spirit. Her grandmother was a virtuous woman for whom virtue stood for courage, challenge and questioning the stereotypes and socially sanctioned division of roles between male and female by patriarchal society. She is marginalized, ill-treated by the system. Her survival in the end is a sign of hope for modern Indian woman. Sonali harshly criticizes the Hindu rituals and stereotypes which subjects women to the cruel trial of sati. She is aware of the evil of traditional Hinduism because her grandmother became a victim of Sati. She is marginalized, treated unfairly by the system. Castigating the ritual of Sati in *Rich Like Us*, she says:

Yet the question remains: what kind of society is it that demands human sacrifice to appease the blood thirst of what kinds of Gods? So I cannot believe in Hinduism, whatever Hinduism might be. Not because of such evils as sati, but because evil is not explained. If the universe is an illusion, and eternity is a split second, and there are eternities of life after life to come, then in terms of cosmos my mother's agony is nothing. And all suffering is nothing. But it is that twitch of time in the cosmos when I saw her there, when I would have given my life to drag her out of the fire, and killed those about me who had consigned her to it. (170)

In *Storm in Chandigarh*, Inder is the typical representative of patriarchal values which puts high premium on the sexual purity and modesty of women before marriage. The patriarchal society's duplicity and double standard can be gauged from the fact that Inder himself carries on extra marital affairs with Mara. But this does not leave any blemish on his character. He turns

wild when Mara questions him. This is amply clear when he reacts to Mara's question if Saroj was indulging in extra marital affairs. Being a typical product of male dominated society, any deviation from his supposed code of morality resents and infuriates him. He says to Mara in *Storm in Chandigarh*:

That kind of remark disgusts me. The thinking behind it disgusts me...There was a time when such things could not be spoken or even thought, except with shame. There is no shame nowadays, no barriers. Everything is taken lightly. And women talk and behave like men. He further says, "A thousand years from now a woman will still want and need a master, the man who will own and command her---and that is the man she will respect". (92)

Sahgal here harshly criticize and disapproves of this patriarchal mentality, male dominance, hypocrisy, mentality with tribal roots, owner servant relationship between husband and wife, different codes of morality and behavior for male and female, and too much emphasis on sexual purity of female while completely overlooking such behavior for males. She castigates the society that considers it a serious deviation and moral lapse and puts high premium on sexual purity. She does not consider anything immoral in premarital and extra marital affairs. She says that women's premarital sex has nothing to do with the pollution of flesh, promiscuity or immorality. In *Storm in Chandigarh*, She says," If chastity is so important and so well worth-preserving, it would be easier to safeguard it by keeping men in seclusion, not women. (172,173)

If we have a critical look especially at her women characters, it becomes clear that her female characters are the victims of patriarchy. In their failed marriages there is an element of incompatibility resulting from starkly two different backgrounds. This leads to the collapse and disintegration of the very institution of marriage. Husbands are steeped in the patriarchy as is obvious from the way Inder reacts to Mara. In both these cases women are considered subservient and subordinate by their husbands. They are just to obey the dictate of their husbands. Women are nothing more than a property and they are always supposed to live in the shadow of their husbands. They have no independent existence as they are appendage to their husbands and they have no individual identity. Then in first case Inder's too much emphasis on sexual purity and his being always haunted by the images of Saroj's former lover shatters their relationship. Makarand Paranjape says:

Inder's fixation on Saroj's one time sexual experience during her student days becomes an insurmountable barrier in their relationship. Inder's ideas about his wife's supposed violation of chastity before her marriage are not so much irrational as tribal; though educated, he thinks of her unconsciously as a fallen woman, soiled or secondhand goods, so to say. (294)

In the same way, *The Day in Shadow* gives a sensitive and horrifying account of the sufferings of a woman in a traditional Indian society when she opts to dissolve a seventeen year old marriage which had failed her miserably. In tradition steeped Indian society, a divorced woman is stigmatized forever and she is curiously watched by others as if divorce was “a disease that left pock marks”. She is the victim of the indifferent behavior of her husband. She does not find response, communication, involvement and love in her marriage. Her husband Som is as conservative and of regressive mind as Inder in *Storm in Chandigarh*. He too considers women subservient and subordinate.

While Simrit and Saroj both represent virtuous woman of Sahgal and but their husbands are deeply rooted in patriarchy and conservative views. Som was too materialistic and is always in the habit of setting a price for any work, just as a businessman. His words were always, “Be tough. Be winner.” (69) This is how he behaved and dealt with his wife too with complete disregard for her emotion and feelings. He was a man of materialistic mind who cared little for the emotional aspect of his wife. When Simrit expected such behavior from him, he did not reciprocate and thus thereby delivering blow to her romanticized idea of married life. Her indifference to his business minded existence and way of life hurt his male ego which pushed both to look up for some solution outside marriage. The unilateral decision taken by Som speaks volumes of the attitudes men in patriarchal societies have toward women. She was suffering but due to pressure of her family she was bearing all the cruelties inflicted upon her by husband. But one day she was shocked when she was told of this unexpected decision. Shyam M. Asnani says:

Simrit gets terribly shaken to her roots when Som abruptly tells that he'll be away to Madras for a week, and that should give her enough time to think over and decide what she wants to do, get on with a normal life or finish this farce once and for all. The ultimatum stuns her. She knows intuitively that he has gone much further in his own mind than thinking things over. He has settled the matter. (63)

Simrit castigates the negative aspect of Hinduism and tradition as it, to some extent, legitimizes and justifies the sufferings and afflictions unleashed by cruel husbands on their wives:

I am not that kind of writer. And I hate this century except for the freedom it brought for countries and people, especially for women. But it is barbaric otherwise, full of rotten, elastic standards and the worship of money. I hate the whole mess of human affairs (35)

In *This Time of Morning* too, Rashmi is the victim of tradition and Hindu rituals. When she finally decides to walk out of her marriage after she failed to get response, communication and involvement from her husband, her mother, Mira, is very unhappy as she was too religious to expect such decision from her daughter. Any breakup in marriage, in her opinion, was unexpected and beyond her imagination as she thought marriage an unbreakable bond. To her, a

woman should remain true and faithful to her husband. She believed in God like status of husband who must be respected. Rashmi's decision to walk out came as an electric shock for her. The writer says:

Rashmi's announcement was worse than bad news. It was a mortal blow to all she held sacred....What reason under heaven could sever the marriage bond? Women stayed married, had since time immemorial stayed married, under every conceivable circumstance, to brutal insensitive husbands, to lunatics and lepers. (146)

Rashmi, Saroj, Simrit, Mona and Rose all bear the brunt of negative aspect of Hinduism. They are oppressed not only by in-laws but also by parents as they instead of helping them walk out of caged marriage insist them to continue bearing the brunt of unfulfilled marriage and remain faithful to their husbands as they are influenced by the teachings of negative aspect of Hinduism. On the one hand likes of Inder taunts his wife for supposed violation of chastity and modesty and is always haunted by the images of Saroj's ex-lover, he continues flirting with other women without ever realizing how his actions and extra marital affairs are unbecoming of his married life. He never bothered to think of the contradiction in his words and actions. He never ever paused to think how his extramarital affair with Mara is against what he preaches his wife. He continues to flirt with Mara, who reminds him of his failure as a husband to respond and communicate to his wife..... "She flies from you apparently in search of comfort you cannot give her".

In *Rich Like Us* too, Ram Swarup despite being married to Mona desperately loves Rose. He remains undeterred to his amorous love with Rose even when he gets the news of the birth of his first baby. This news made a little difference for him. He persists with his affairs with Rose and finally marries and brings her to India increasing the woes of his first wife, Mona. After marrying Rose he develops amorous love with Marcella. Rose's emotional protests do little to stop him from moving ahead with his newly found love. He considers it his right to behave the way he likes. This all shows how tradition and negative aspect of Hinduism gives a tool in the hands of these conservative husbands to oppress woman instead of considering them their equal partners.

In this very novel, Bimmie's premature marriage offers us an example of how traditional and patriarchal societies treat women. In these traditional marriages a girl accepts happily the stereotyped role of woman and adjusts herself within the parameters of marriage and feels satisfaction in her role as a wife, and a mother. She does not look beyond this socially assigned role. Bimmie despite being younger to Sonali and Kiran is going to marry a person she had not seen and heard about. She even doesn't know the meaning of marriage except that she will get good clothes, heavy ornaments, jewelleryes and a good house. The plight of Bimmie in her marriage makes Sonali sad. She feels restless. One thing to note here is that what Sonali feels for

Bimmie in a sensitive way is never felt by her parents. They are blind to the fact of Bimmie being too young. That the early marriage may cause a great suffering to Bimmie never comes to their mind.

Like Bimmie's, traditional marriage we also get another traditional marriage of Pinky in *A Situation in New Delhi*. Her marriage is also arranged by her parents. Pinky is the daughter of a friend of Devi, who is now the education minister. Like Bimmie, Pinky is being married to a person whom she has never met but still she is very happy at her wedding. She also conforms to the stereotyped role of woman taught by mothers and the society by accepting marriage as her destiny and parents decisions as a blessing. However, Rishad resents this arranged marriage as is obvious from the way he reacts to her mother on being asked to attend Pinky's engagement party.

What in the world will I do there" Besides, that kind of marriage is just organized rape.' One way or another hideous word kept figuring in her day. 'Pinky hasn't been allowed to put her nose out of the house without her mother's permission. And now they are handing her over like a pudding to that nitwit who hasn't put his nose out of his house—his mental nose any way. (25)

In traditional and patriarchal society, mothers see the marriage as the be all and end all in a girl's life. Keeping that in mind they mould their daughters according to their desires and exhort them to remain faithful and loyal to their husbands. They never teach them to assert their individuality and independent existence and rather ask them to remain passive and never challenge the God like image of their husbands. In this way these mothers acts as authority figures and stifle their young daughters in the name of conforming to traditional and social values. Sahgal has beautifully portrayed these traditional mothers in her novels. Nita's mother, in *This Time of Morning*, and also the mother of Rashmi in this novel and the mother of Sonali in *Rich Like Us* confirm Sahgal's hypothesis.

Nayantara Sahgal challenges this attitude of society by investing her female characters with courage and a conviction not to remain passive and ensures their freedom, individuality and their own space to operate fully. She is against the women living in the shadows of their husbands. She seeks equal status, response, communication, a relationship based on mutual love and understanding. Her female characters prefer to rebel and even walk out of marriages which oppress and suppress them without redress. They do not suffer silently and substitute the self-sacrifice dictum of their mothers and other social taboos by replacing it with courage and conviction. In *Passion for India*, She herself says:

In every novel the heroine has moved one step further away from the stereotype of the virtuous woman into a new definition of virtue. . . . What does these three women [Rashmi, Saroj, and Simrit] walking out have to do with their virtue? The meaning of sati is a virtuous woman. And this is synonymous with self-immolation - a tradition arising out of the concept that woman is her husband's property and has no other life. Traditional virtue lies in staying put, suffering. The new woman does the opposite. No more sati, she is determined to live, and to live in self-respect. Her virtue is courage, which is a willingness to risk the unknown and to face the consequences. (84)

In her works, there is a set of characters that represent the extreme level of patriarchy. They believe in traditional values and socially defined roles of male and female. They do not allow their wives to assert their freedoms and individual choices as they consider it against their manhood and a kind of digression in women's characters. They dominate their wives and end up losing their wives. This class is represented by Inder, Ram Swarup and Som. Makarand Paranjape says:

I would argue that such men are also victims of patriarchal Hinduism. They have internalized the violence of the patriarchy and in turn directed it outward at their wives. They have been handed down expectations about "husbandhood" and "wifeness" which are incompatible with contemporary reality. In brief, tradition has turned them into oppressors. Their tragedy is that they are incapable of introspection or change and must be abandoned by their spouses in the end. (295)

There is then another group that represents the writer's point of view by adopting a liberal and moderate line. They are modern, liberal, and compassionate and seek equal relationship with women. They reject this traditional dictum and are in support of women enjoying their freedom and individual existence. They respond, communicate and accept women's individual existence with their minds and bodies. This class of her male characters is represented by Sanad, Rakesh and Vishal Dubey. They do not seek dominance over their female partners. As Vishal represents this class when he tells Saroj in *Storm in Chandigarh*, "It has taken a million years of evolution for a person and his cherished individuality to matter . . . and no terror must be allowed to destroy that. (231). He further says in *Storm in Chandigarh*:

Most of us are Hindus. History will say, these were a people who could not survive modern times. The modern world was too much for them. They never came to terms with it. They just went to pieces. They could have lived if they had had the courage. 'The courage to do what?' asked Saroj. 'To change. To do what has not been done before. To hold up

what we call sacred to the light and examine it and throw it away if necessary. There is something in us that won't face up to an issue. A monolithic slab of antiquity had survived the ages. A way of life, wrongly called a religion, lay embedded on it. Against it the intellect foundered and the emotions were reduced to insignificance." (76,77)

To conclude, Nayantara Sahgal advocates the breaking down of polarities between man and woman to ensure absolute equality and freedom. Her female characters transgress patriarchal code of morality and defy the social norms that fetter them. They prefer to rise, revolt to realize their own worth and question the 'naturalness' of certain social actions instead of remaining curbed, controlled, directed and denied of their individuality. The writer invests them with courage to challenge prescribed gender roles and liberate them from male dominance. Her novels revolve around their sense of individuality, discontentment, frustrations and difficulty in adjustment. Her idea of freedom includes freedom of thought and expression, freedom to choose their life partners, freedom to talk and share her thoughts with a man of her choice and like without any persisting sense of guilt and immorality. She does not tolerate any morality and ethics coming in the way of self exploration and self discovery. Her women characters tend to adopt anything useful and empowering from any perspective irrespective of the source where they come from. Her characters struggle to feel free and challenge any oppressive environment where one's thought and ideas are restricted. They create openness between their inner selves and their environment and uphold the same with dignity with a new outlook on life and an alternative perspective to everything. Therefore, her works present a fine and judicious blend of tradition and modernity as she neither rejects nor blindly accepts tradition. But she rejects tradition when it puts restrictions on a person's freedom and life. She accepts religion and tradition as a faith but does not allow it to dominate a person's daily affairs. She stands for religious freedom and respects of all religions. Rashmi, Saroj and Simrit adopt modernity by choosing to walk and not to suffer in their failed marriages. They affirm their individuality over religious and traditional dictum and asserted modern notions of self-fulfillment. They decide to assert their individuality which tradition would have denied them. They seek freedom to decide, to act, and opt for options not available within their failed marriages. In opposing their socially assigned roles, walking out of marriages, asserting individuality, affirming freedom and equality, rejecting God like images of their husbands; these women are choosing modernity over tradition. Otherwise, life with Inder and Som would have amounted to accepting not just a loss of individuality, but, by extension, a kind of living death which they have clearly rejected.

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