

Nayantara Sahgal as Champion of the Indian Woman's Quest for Identity: A Note

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ABSTRACT

This paper beautifully analyses, in brief, the contribution of Nayantara Sahgal to Indian English fiction by a profound treatment of themes coupled with a creative vision towards the happenings of India before Independence and also examines Sahgal's depiction of the Indian Woman's quest for identity and self-fulfillment and various other issues associated with it.

Key words: woman's quest, identity.

Nayantara Sahgal is a front-ranking writer with a considerable number of political novels, stories, sketches and journalism. Her roots are found to be in the rich Indian political tradition. The originality, she has achieved, is not because of her interest towards politics but because her ability to mix up facts with fiction. Her eight novels not only constitute an impressive segment of the Indian English novel but also sum up the saga of India's struggle for freedom and the changes it has brought about in the traditional social set up in India. Sahgal's one of main aspects of fiction is her traditional faith and attitude to politics and personal relationships. Though she is unique in her artistic sensibility as well as in her particular manner of projecting national consciousness, she also reflects the consciousness and the strange and sudden ways in which it has come to shape the character of individuals and the temper of the collective life.

Nayantara Sahgal, born on May 10, 1927 in Allahabad, is the second daughter of Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit and the child of rich heritage. Her parents and relatives actively participated in the freedom struggle. Politics

entered the life of Sahgal very early and she learnt to accept many unusual happenings as matters of normal occurrence. She had a formal schooling at a Convent and she was sent to America in 1943. The Education in America gave her wide experience in life. She got married and divorced after the death of her father. Then she took to writing fiction and journalism. She is said to have established herself both as a creative writer and a political columnist. She has to her credit publication of such notable novels in 1. **This Time of Morning**, 2. **A Time to be Happy**, 3. **A Situation in New Delhi**, 4. **Rich Like us**, 5. **Plans for Departure**, 6. **Mistaken Identity**, 7. **Storm in Chandigarh**, 8. **The Day in Shadow**. "The novels of Nayantara Sahgal derive their material from the national and political scene of India between 1920 and 1950. The Gandhian values have formed the basis of Sahgal's approach to problems both political and personal". (Singh, 10-11)

Nayantara Sahgal was fostered in the climate of freedom and compassion and she was too aghast as an adult to discover how different life could be. She married Gautam Sahgal in 1949, a young man working in a British

Company and in spite of its being a love marriage, it failed hopelessly by leading to her divorce of Gautam in 1967. In her article **This Time of Fulfillment**, she describes her unsuccessful married life with Gautam as:

“The two feet square room of my own choice, when she became aware of “the shocking assumption of inequality In case of conflict the man’s will and desire must prevail.... I was uneasy and restless adjusting to the demands of a personality and environment whose goals and texture were different from anything I had known or been comfortable with” (Femina, 15)

Nayantara Sahgal’s contribution with regard to treatment of themes is enormous and varied. She dwells upon contemporary events in her novels like **Storm in Chandigarh**, **Rich Like us** and **A Situation in New Delhi**. Her novels **Plans for Departure and Mistaken Identity** were a creative vision towards the happenings of India before Independence. The influence of Nehru and Gandhi on Sahgal is clear and she has offered a fresh insight into Gandhism, Nehruism and their impact on the evolution and progress of India. A.V. Krishna Rao succinctly states:

“Nayantara Sahgal has inherited and cherished a certain set of values and attitudes towards like which can be best described as a complex of political liberalism, social sophistication, economic moderation and cultural catholicity in continual interaction with the Gandhian idealism”. (p.44)

Sahgal’s very first novel, **A Time to be Happy** (1958) is a political novel, a chronicle of the Indian National Movement covering a span of sixteen years from 1932 to 1948. An Indian women’s journey towards the recognition of selfhood against the background of the freedom struggle is subtly outlined by the

writer in this novel. In **The Time of Morning** (1965), she highlights the tension between tradition and modernity, the birth pangs of a new social order reflecting the death throes of the old order. In **Storm in Chandigarh**, she unfolds the fact that freedom is a necessary fundamental requisite for the development of the individual, then it assures the inviolability of the human self, stripped of social hypocrisy, pretence and conformity.

Nayantara Sahgal is a champion of the Indian woman’s quest for self-fulfillment and various other themes associated with it. In **A Time to be Happy** Maya endeavours to flutter her wings for a flight of her own, though heavily pressed down by the taboos and conventions of orthodox Hindu society. Instead of revolting to marriage, Maya seeks fulfillment in the service of the people. The novelist also dwells on various sterile social conventions and prescription of roles for women in our culture. **This Time of Morning**, brings out the role of woman who savours the art of living: Rashmi tells Rakesh,

“It’s just being alive. I am sure I would rather live in pain and misery than not at all”. (p.41)

Rashmi thus revolts against marriage and seeks divorce. **Storm in Chandigarh** and **The Day in Shadow** have two women who suffer in or out of marriage because of male Chauvinism. The woman’s quest for self-fulfillment is a political question at root. The suppression of women is due to the fact that man wants to keep power in his hands and the women’s quest for self-fulfillment implies a challenge to an rebellion against man’s power. Feminism has been all along considered a political movement. The woman’s quest for self-fulfillment is basically the question of freedom and development of the individual. Nayantara Sahgal, being a social reformer, has a humanitarian approach

and is extremely sensitive to Indian womanhood as being wronged. John Galsworthy was the champion of the poor and Sahgal is the same for the wrong Indian womanhood. Sahgal's novels convey realistic impressions of Indian life. She was and still is a capture of social tradition and role perception.

Nayantara Sahgal examines in her writings the tension between the traditional Hindu culture and the predicament of the contemporary Indian women. Liberated women realize the need for individuality and revolt against the traditional norms:

“Leaving marriage that had become an emotional waste land” (Mitchell, 61)

Nayantara Sahgal's world is made up of two types of women characters. The first group of women is of those women who are happy in the confines of Hindu orthodoxy and the other of those women who have a strong sense of individuality and an analytical mind but are shunting between tradition and modernity. Sahgal also presents in her novels women who are relentlessly fighting for their individuality and unwilling to live their lives captivated within the four walls of traditional values. Rashmi of **This Time of Morning**, Saroj of **Storm in Chandigarh** and Smirit of **The Day in Shadow** are Sahgal's New women – though the process of awakening in them is quite slow and the revolt comes after much retrospection. However, these thinking and sensitive women have to face a lot of opposition from the narrow-minded and orthodox Indian society, which considers tolerance, patience and forbearance as essential virtues of women. Marital morality as presented in Sahgal's works is based on honesty, mutual trust, understanding, consideration and freedom. Sahgal condemns selfishness, pretence and pride, which are the main destroyer of a marriage. Mostly Sahgal's

women are tutored to remain acquiescent, subdued, silent and suffering but like Saroj, Rashmi and Smirit they show signs on awakening. Saroj, Smirit, Rashmi, Martha, Anna and Molly all divorce their husbands instead of living a suffocating life of injustice and pain.

Nayantara Sahgal clusters all the important issues concerning women and weaves the various strands into one another and then relates them to urge to powder and essential humanism. In the patriarchal society of our country, it is the male who tries to colonize and marginalize the female and not the vice-versa. Her novels render a living picture of the oppressed, depressed and suppressed life of women in India – as a child, as a young woman, as an old woman in a male dominated patriarchal society. Honesty and simplicity many a times land people in the desert of sorrow and depression. This is at least true in the case of Saroj who plays an important role in **Storm in Chandigarh**. Women in the fictional world of Nayantara Sahgal are mute suffers in marriage and do not seem to have the audacity to stand up against the pain and misery imposed on them in it. Sahgal portrays the constraints of marriage and all the miseries and agonies coming with it she never makes any radical statement against marriage as such. For example, Saroj in **Storm in Chandigarh** suffers immensely because of the duplicitous and callous attitude of Inder but her revolt is directed towards Inder and not towards marriage. Smirit in **The Day in Shadow** experiences more misery and unhappiness in marriage than any woman character in Nayantara Sahgal's novels feels:

“as if large pieces of her had been cut out with scissors. With an icy wind blowing through the gaps” (TDS, 16)

Maya in **A Time to be Happy** Uma in **This Time of Morning** and Mona in **Rich Like Us** do not find marriage giving them what they pine for and yet either they try to divert their attention from the pains inflicted by marriage, like Maya and Uma, or they try to cope with it till, they themselves are destroyed and demolished. Sahgal's women are out to realize their true self. However, they are not concerned with any probing of self, which may have any philosophical, psychological or sociological implications or connotations. They are simply concerned with the injustice and inequality of treatment meted out to them. They do not wish to turn the norms of society upside down but are against the concept of them being treated as property and not as persons.

Nayantara Sahgal's **Mistaken Identity** has innumerable references to the miserable plight of women in those days. There are four major women characters in this novel, Sylla, a parsee girl, Willie May, an American girl, Razia the Muslim girl the narrator loves, and the mother of the narrator. Sylla and Willie May are liberated women even by Western standards. Sylla is a highly fashionable girl who wears frocks, swims in swimming costumes, has bobbed hair and enjoys an informal relationships with Bhushan Singh. Bhushan Singh, in fact was in favour of marrying Sylla but it was she who outmightly rejected the proposal.

“I think she understood as soon as she met me that I was a man just off an operating tale and the anesthetic hadn't worn off. When it did she didn't like what she saw” (MI, 116)

Bhushan Singh's mother is another fine example of a conservative woman. She is a religious woman and makes pilgrimages to a number of places to have a son and takes good care of him after his birth. Bhushan Singh too is devoted to his mother but his father neglects her for his younger queen. She in the end marries Yusuf out of her sexual frustration. Nayantara Sahgal's journey of the Indian women's quest for self is more or less like a revolution and aims at freedom for expression for being, for dignity, for love and for equality.

To conclude, Nayantara Sahgal has presented women who suffered due to the sexiest bias in the patriarchal society which gives a subordinate position to women and also treats them as second-rate people. Sahgal envisions a world which is based on equality, sharing the functions, the virtues of women are equally valued with those of men.

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All that we are is the result of what we have thought.

~ *Buddha*