

FEMINISM AND ITS INFLUENCE ON WOMEN'S QUEST FOR IDENTITY IN NAYANTARA SAHAGAL'S THE MISTAKEN IDENTITY

Dr. Baban Seyke

Assistant Professor (English)

Swami Vivekananda Government College
Berasia, Bhopal (M.P.)

Abstract

Sahgal though not a militant feminist, feels strongly against female exploitation and male sarcasm to the issue of identity crisis for women. whatever her stand she does not lapse into venom-spelling against men. Her approach in this respect is quite positive. Female revolt is perceived as a measure to set right what has gone wrong, to cleanse the society of all evils against women. She does not concern herself so much with pointing a finger of blame at men, as with the exploration of ways which may lead to emancipation. This paper presents the problems faced by woman and their struggle for self-identity and their emancipation from the traditional bondage of the patriarchal society.

Keywords: Nayantara Sahgal ,Feminism, female protagonist, The Mistaken Identity

Women are born as free as men, but they are not allowed to remain free for long. In fact feminists assert that women are made by society. It's a person that takes birth but society with its snarled up views of virtue and moral makes out of them:

"One is not born but rather becomes a women. It is civilization as a whole that produces this creature, intermediate between male and eunuch, which is described as feminine.

In fact this is one of the ills of patriarchal society. Right from her birth the so called feminine virtues and graces are so instilled in her that she forgets that she has an independent identity as a person. For man his will is law but for woman there are certain pre-ordained moulds into which she has to fit herself or else she is crushed and finished. She has to be the perfect "angel in the house" as called by Virginia Woolf. The patriarchal set up dwarfs the very existence of women. It is believed that if women are to derive satisfaction it should be within the framework of their relationship with their husbands and their families. Even the faintest of any such idea that all human beings and women are no less humane than men exist primarily for the realization of one's self is considered preposterous.

Feminists assert the need for women to become aware of themselves as person. They use the term 'feminist consciousnesses' or 'consciousness raising' in this context. Searching for her selfhood does not necessarily mean defying men but it certainly means sedition against all

imperial forces. There have been thinkers who believe that women's struggle is directed against men. Olive Banks, for instance in his *Faces of Feminism* reaches the conclusion that women do not want to copy the independence of men. They instead, dream of 'a world without men, of the perfect friendship of women unalloyed by base and coarser natures' "Nevertheless, the fact remains that their struggle is not so much against men, as it is for the recognition of their existence and for selfhood.

Nayantara Sahgal's novels show her deep concern for the emancipation of women; she wants them to become aware of their existence as individuals. though most of her women are portrayed as wives, mothers and daughters, her views regarding feminism find illustration through these domesticated characters. A professed feminist Nayantara Sahgal's journey as a woman writer starts from the search for sainthood and reaches its culmination in the attainment of it. She has a humanitarian dislike of suffering and inequality. She is sensitive to the suffering of Indian women and champions their cause:

"If Galsworthy was the champion of the poor.
Nayantara Sahgal is the champion of the much
wronged Hindu womanhood"

Sahgal's novel *Mistaken Identity* is written in the backdrop of Indian National Movement. This time though 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. Though these women belong to different generations, in their dislike of establishment and orthodoxy they are much the same. Mother is a member of older generation but quite unlike the women of her age (Lakshmi and Kusum in *A Time to be Happy* and Mira in *This Time of Morning*) she refuses to follow the traditional ways. she has her own way and she could not suppress her indomitable spirit. Insurrection seems to be her second nature, an indispensable part of her personality. Here is an ever thirsty soul looking for horizons beyond her reach. Bhushan Singh's opinion of his mother is, "Anything that defies explanation makes perfect Sense to mother. The traditional five senses have never been enough for her."

Her pining for a child is then, symbolic of her search for identity. Its not only as a woman, but also as a person, that she would not be satisfied before she has produced a child. A child for her is by no means a requirement essential for hierarchy but an expression of herself. Mother is a woman who attains flowering as a person after marriage only as it was as a child of five that she was married. At the age of thirteen she was brought to the palace. Its here only that she unfolds, attains maturity and like all women behind a purdah, loses her face. Ironically, it is here again that she becomes aware of the need a deadening, excruciating need to search for her selfhood. its not as a wife or as a mother that she is satisfied, she has to survive as a person.

Her fascination with superhuman powers sadhus and occults is an expression of her preoccupation with emancipation. Though superstition is a kind of bondage yet for her belief in such weird powers mirrors her own yearning for freedom. Power in all, forms is welcome because power rules the roost. She is full of energy herself but it assumes the dimension of power only near the end of novel. Her respect for the sarina is her tribute to an equally strong soul. Her defiance is seen in all her action. when she finally realizes that there is no returning of her husband, she is filled with intense hatred for him. Unlike ordinary women she does not take to brooding. Instead she owes to finish all reminders of his authority in the house. When in a fit of fury, Bhushan breaks all the valuables in the room, where he had been locked, instead of getting angry she becomes ecstatic. Her jubilation is due to the fact that those valuables belonged

to her husband. It is as if her revenge has begun which reaches its culmination in her leaving the house and getting married to Yusuf.

Parallel to the story of mother is the story of Sylla. A Parsee girl, she is comparatively free and uninhibited. She is a girl who does not have to struggle for freedom, for she belongs to a community and a family where she does not have to live according to the norms set down by others. Her will is the only guiding force for her. This woman is refreshingly aware of herself as a person. She has male friends she writes and directs plays and is free to pursue her hobby of reading good books. She is not only physically involved with the narrator but also has a towering influence on him. This woman is never faced with the need to discover herself for the lonely reason that she is the only woman in Sahgal's fiction who is wholly emancipated and free.

Another woman in search of identity is Bhushan Singh's school teacher whose metamorphosis is incredible. From being a school teacher, she has become the head and guardian of 'the fallen sisters'. The hoards that she is in-charge of are not petty flesh-sellers only. They take active part in the national movement too. Their involvement with the nation's cause is their effort to establish their individuality vicariously. These faceless creatures are in search of an identity and national movement seems to provide them with an opportunity to discover one.

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 plain that no relation is good or bad in itself, it has to be free from all labels. Even extra-marital and pre-marital relations are not entirely immoral, if they tend to fulfill 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.

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