

## FAMILY STRUCTURE IN THE NOVELS OF NAYANTARA SAHGAL

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*Family is the basic unit of close knit people jointly exerting for a living and for prosperity in terms acceptable to them. These goals have to be sought with the means available in the society whether the means accrue to the family by hereditary rights or each family has to newly acquire them, the family has to function with them in the prevalent economy. The nature and potentialities of these means of livelihood that are available to a family really shape its composition. Family is a part of society and its composition and structure are its adaptations to factors conditioning primarily its survival in the pursuit of economic goals. The composition of the family and its structure, therefore, may not be properly understood unless we relate them to nature and scope of the means of livelihood available to the family. This brings us to the consideration of occupation as a determination of the family composition. Family also convey the relationships of family members and how these relationships are manages and how they breakdown due to circumstances.*

Family is the basic and universal social structure of human society. It fulfils needs and performs functions which are indispensable for the continuity, integration and change in the social system. The forms and functions of family have undergone adaptive changes with changes in the technological and economic superstructure of society. One way to characterize this change is to associate conjugal or nuclear forms of families with relatively modernized or industrial society and extended or joint types of families with traditional agrarian and pre-industrial societies. The tradition from extended family-based society to nuclear family based society is thus, in essence, an example of structural change, since this involves systematic changes in role-structures through processes of differentiation. A Nuclear Family is itself an example of structural differentiation from the more composite social structure of an extended family.

Usually such families were patrilocal and patriarchal; in such families women had relatively subordinate position; all members were guided in their activities by an elder family head and inter personal relations of all members were authoritarian. Family in such society was also the unit of economic, cultural, religious and political activities. Feelings of individualism and personal freedom were foreign to this type of family organization. Since the economic structure of such societies was closed and technological innovations were rare, the total volume of knowledge, which existed in the form of folklore, mythologies, riddles and folk songs, etc. could be handed down to the younger generation by the elders through the medium of oral tradition.

As the industrial revolution progressed, the transition from the extended to conjugal forms of families became much more accelerated and the latter form became a predominant feature of society. The extended family changes into nuclear family, the socialization of children in the family takes on a new direction; the child has now to grow in a comparatively much smaller social universe. In a nuclear family the emotional universe of a child oscillates between degrees of attachment and alienation.

The process of cyclical changes in the structure of families simultaneously bring out two points : first, that all changes in the contemporary family structure, are not caused by exogenous factors of Western borrowing alone, and secondly, to assume a universal function for the nuclear families universal evolutionism as implied in the criticism. William J. Goode says that “at any given point of time, most Indian households are not joint composition; this fact, however, does not prove much change has occurred, since most were not joint in the past, either, nevertheless, Indian values and attitudes are still generally in favour of the joint family and a number of important structural changes in the joint family are occurring, however.”<sup>1</sup> Changes in the family structure are frequent and changes have also been observed in the internal structure of families. Transition from joint to nuclear families also alerts the nature of affection and sentiments in inter-personal relationship of family members. Changes in the structure and functions of joint families in India are thus following a reconciliatory pattern, a pattern common in the structural changes in the Indian society. In spite of these changes, the traditional world-view of the joint family still prevails. The joint family property did not include the individual possessions of the members; at least from medieval times onwards personal earnings, gifts, and so on were generally thought to belong to the member of the family who earned them. The social environment, prominent among all changes like industrialization, education, occupation and urbanization. The changing role of the family in the wake of large scale legislation and economic development in India.

Nayantara Sahgal’s achievement consists in attempting a portrayal of relationships basically husband-wife relationship. In all her novels there is a real picture of Nuclear Family, where husband-wife live together with their disputes. In her novels, there is nothing like traditional Hindu family. Nayantara Sahgal makes her protagonists come to grips with the ills the body politic is afflicted with, rather than leaving them sitting back in abject surrender. In her novels, The Individual is the most important factor. The individual is the criterion with which she judges all issues in politics and religion, sociology and ethics.

“Indian – by blood, nationality, upbringing and conviction – and Western by virtue of my English medium education”.<sup>2</sup> Nayantara Sahgal was in a unique position to take stock of her social surroundings, and she was able to do that with great insight. It is her attempt, through her novels, “to excoriate the diseased and the decadent part of the Indian tradition”,<sup>3</sup> that makes her worthy of remembrance. However, she is not “a thoroughbred non-conformist”.

( p.92) “She accepts the composite character of the Indian tradition and affirms its catholicity which allows for the human being maximum freedom”. ( p.92)

In all her novels Nayantara Sahgal re-examines society in all its aspects from a critical standpoint and always upholds the freedom and dignity of the human self.

The deteriorating social conditions, superstitions, social inequality, and many other social evils affected her too and she felt that literature could play a vital role in matters social by making men and women at least ruminant over their existential situation with her moral vision serving as the guiding light.

Rousseau in *The Social Contract* states : “Man is born free and everywhere he is in chains”. He is bound by the chains of social customs and its evils. He is corrupted by the artificialities and inhibitions of society called into question the standard view of civilized man. Nayantara Sahgal had always been very patriotic, growing in a family where she could not help being anything else and her attitudes are decidedly Indian with the added advantage of Western liberal education. Part of the reason for Nayantara Sahgal’s popularity is that she is seriously and compassionately interested in the welfare of the mass of the people and determined to attack any social evil which

made their lives unhappy. As a result, all her novels, at least partly, are concerned with social issues and they become themes in her novels.

What Nayantara Sahgal emphasizes is that the impact of two cultures, opposed to each other, requires adjustment. The novelist “attempts to project a nation’s consciousness through the fragmentary consciousness of an individual”. (p.18)

“This Time of Morning”, is a high drama of New Delhi’s fashionable upper-middle class society. It is peopled with politicians, who are highly placed, their wives, liberated society ladies as well as traditional educated house wives. The whole of the sophisticated urban environment in modern Delhi is included in the novel.

“Storm in Chandigarh”, Nayantara Sahgal’s, brings out the disturbed, chaotic, social condition where the masses were prone to display their opinions, thoughts and resentment through violent means. This of course had political motivations behind it. The author draw the entire picture of the society, not by describing each character’s social position but by giving a general and comprehensive impression through other incidents concerning social conditions in the country. Sahgal’s novels invariably deal with social issues and this novel describes the stat of young hearts broken up by compulsions of matrimony and new found love breaking the meaningless barriers of society.

‘Rich Like Us’, is a memorable and significant novel about an India, of British Raj and the partition, of the continuities and the ties of family and caste and religion that stretch back to centuries.

Sonali, western educated and liberal in outlook, is a young woman who makes no pretences about showing her dislike for anything that is artificial or hypocritical, be it her own mother, sister or brother-in-law. She gives an account of her childhood where her Kashmiri mother drilling “Kashmiriness” into her, her large family, their enjoying Kashmiri food and complexions are described by a touch of Sarcasm, suggesting as though anything or anyone ‘un-Kashmiri’ was not worth a second thought. In fact it is her Maharashtrian father who is her ideal. He has long since realized the senselessness in arguing with his wife.

Her novel ‘Mistaken Identity’, is a faithful representation of the seeming solidity of the social class system and of the orthodox Hindu and Muslim faiths. So apparent in the early twentieth century but which was extremely oppressive. It was a dismal period for the Rajas when they had to bow before the Raj. It was also a period when the government saw sedition everywhere, and no one who was the least bit under suspicion could escape the long hands of the government.

Nayantara Sahgal saw that modern life could be interpreted and could gain depth of meaning by being allied to parallel patterns of human behaviour embodied in tradition and culture. She was impressed not by a clash between ancient ritual and myth and modern behaviour but by a sense of continuity in man’s search for significance. It is not a war between tradition and modernity but is a fusion of the virtues of both. Nayantara neither rejects nor accepts any of these blindly. Sahgal dwells on tradition and modernity with a view to providing an aesthetic, moral and political education for her generation. Her values, determined by Indian tradition and culture did not undergo any change under the influence of Western education. Her free liberal thinking makes her neither partial to nor biased against any culture, which has a positive aspect to it. All the characteristics of modernity and tradition, which do not harm anybody in any way either mentally or physically is something to be accepted. Pre-marital and extra-marital affairs are a common feature in most of her novels. Nayantara’s pride in Indian traditions and cultural heritage is evident.

#### **NOTES AND REFERENCES**

1. Goode, Op. Cit., pp.238-239. Modernisation of Indian Tradition, Singh Y.
2. Sahgal Nayantara, “Testament of an Indo-Anglian Writers”, Indian and Foreign Review, Vol10, No.4, December 1, 1972, pp.17-18.
3. Rao A.V. Krishna, “Nayantara Sahgal”, Madras, M. Seshachalam and Co., 1976, p.91.