

FEMINIST CONSCIOUSNESS IN NAYANTARA SAHGAL'S STORM IN CHANDIGARH

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Yes, I was thinking, lying beside him,
That I loved, and was much loved
It was a physical thing, he said suddenly.
End it, I cried, end it and let us be free.¹

(Kamala Das)

From the very beginning of civilization man has subjugated woman for the sake of his pleasure and comfort whereas he never cared about her 'self' and persona. In the phallogocentric society man has become not only the authority on women's life but upto a great extent he controls her femininity; becomes the judge of her life and takes all decisions according his wish without concerning her fervor. He commands and woman has to obey but if she dares to deny, she is punished and locked in the attic to make her realize that 'the dark holds terror,' for she could not dare to repeat the same mistake. But time changes and woman refuses to be treated as a sex object, or rather as a doormat. She raises her own identity and protests against the cruel code and conduct of patriarchal power structure. She steps out of the confine rooms of the 'hunted house' and established 'a room of her own', where she confronts that 'dark holds no terror'. Now she is "educated, active, independent and mature and responds to the expanding roles of woman in society and firmly stands against her victimization, marginalization, discrimination and exploitation."² Her conscious has led her to a 'New Woman' where she is standing equal to man in all spheres of life.

NayantaraSahgal though never claimed to be a feminist yet her *Storm in Chandigarh* portrays the development of feminist consciousness in her, which is clearly apparent from the character analysis of three mismatched couples; Vishal and Leela, Inder and Saroj, and Jit and Mara. Sarojthe chief protagonista "bright girl with a college degree,"³(166) was born and brought up in a liberal atmosphere of prosperous family but she could not find the same atmosphere at her husband's home. She was expecting equality in marriage but her natural intellect, honesty and sincerity was totally neglected by her husband Inder, just because of her short term affair before marriage, though he himself seeks happiness outside marriage and

involved in extramarital relations with Mara, but at the same time he is neither able to forget nor forgives his wife. This becomes a great issue that parted them at last.

Sahgal depicts poignantly that how the first priority of a woman is to maintain the sanctity of marriage and to maintain their relation. Saroj “an exaggerated earth mother stereotype – a suburban house fraue,”⁴ mutely suffers humiliation, degradation and mental trauma just to save the marriage and to the future of her children. Her husband treats her brutally even than she loves him honestly, she reveals, “Where would you go far off into your wilderness where I can’t reach you. Don’t go and be lonely out there and don’t leave me lonely here.”(132) As a typical Indian woman, Saroj always prefers her ‘home’ where she lives with her husband and children, but on other hand as a modern educated woman she refuses to tolerate the insulting attitude of the power structure. Earlier she had tried her level best to tie their relationship into well knit but the rigidness and suspicious nature of her husband makes it difficult to tear away the blinds between themselves. Despite her every effort to break the silence between them she gets only negligence which widens her sense of loneliness. She feels alone even in the presence of Inder. She admits it to Vishal, “I am alone even when Inder is here.”(229)

On the other hand Inder being a conformist, though educated, is not ready to forget that his wife has lost her virginity before marriage. This becomes such a great issue that it hovers on his consciousness during day and night. Nayantara Sahgal projects Saroj as a ‘New Woman’ with a liberal attitude who does not count her pre-marital relations as a crime but considers it as a part of the process of her growing up. Although Inder humiliates on the ground of her deed but she remains firm on her views and says, “I don’t want forgiveness. I’ve committed no crime.”(101) The reason of her bold and candid replies to her husband may be her pride and purity. As an educated modern woman she likes to live in the present and knows through and through that she is totally sincere in her conjugal relationship. She clears her mind to Inder, “Look at me! I am clean and whole and yours.”(101) As a ‘New Woman’ of the twentieth century she does not want to give any proof of her chastity and honesty neither she asks him for any.

Sahgal portrays Vishal as contrast to Inder. Undoubtedly Vishal is author’s own voice as Sahgalseems to support the issue of feminism through his character. He is introduced as a true counselor of Saroj who always makes her conscious about her individual freedom. In Vishal’s company she feels much relieved and relaxed from the tension, suffocation and tiresome routine and repetition of life. He makes her aware about the new avenues of life. Whenever she feels herself trapped in the puzzles of life, Vishal’s words encourages her to take further step. She shares;

Vishal was right there was only one way to
live, without pretence. It would be the ultimate
healing balm to the lonely spaces of the spirit,
beyond which there would be no darkness. (207)

Vishal is always with Saroj as a mouthpiece of Sahgal to generate a new awareness of feminist consciousness in her. His views on various issues seem interesting to Saroj and her personality develops due to free exchange of views with him. On other hand, her husband treats her as an ‘other’, a subordinate. He considers wife and children as ‘sacks of potatoes’. Though they are husband and wife living under one roof yet they “are two entirely different kinds of people.”(160) Saroj’s compromises have no meaning to Inder. She tries to make Inder realize the

depth of her love but she receives only humiliation and degradation. Saroj's character poignantly portrays the dilemma of Indian Woman who is "caught into the flux of tradition and modernity shaded with the burden of the past."⁵ Through the character of Saroj, Sahgal evinces that women no longer would bear physical and mental cruelty and torture. Saroj, a mother of two and seven months pregnant, leaves her husband's home when he beats her for no reason, at least for no fault of her own. She raised her consciousness against her husband tyranny, and protests, "That's humiliating like being at the mercy of a tyrant." (191) Her friend Vishal Dubey raises her self confidence and reveals new avenues of life before her and she takes a timely decision to walk out of marriage. Ultimately she declares, "It is gone, the thing we were trying to built. You've torn it down. I should have known you would. Please leave me alone." (225)

The next female protagonist, Sahgal's typical modern girl, Mara, has been portrayed as a contrast to Saroj. If Saroj is a 'New Woman', Mara, up to some extent exposes the characteristics of 'Newly Born Woman'. She doesn't consider desire as a dirty word and doesn't feel ashamed of her body and desires. She even doesn't hesitate to have extra-marital relations with Inder. She wanted a life of her own will. She does whatever her conscious allows her. She "could lay hands on and the best of each-the softness of Jit and the hardness of Inder." (61) But gradually she realizes Inder's androcentric attitude, meanwhile manages her self-steam and breaks all relations with him. She is intelligent and "was conscious of all that she did." (139) Nobody can make her an object of his use. In discussion with Inder she unfolds the hypocrisy of male chauvinism and challenged the age old tradition;

You gave a woman the perfection of which
you are capable, the finest flower of you most
evolved instincts, and it was a waste....She did
not want to be cherished and affection made
no impression on her." (139)

Mara, 'an unusual and very intelligent girl', too reveals herself as a mouthpiece of Sahgal like Vishal. The thoughts of the protagonist seem as an echo of the writer's own feelings. Sahgal herself accepts it, "Pieces of me going in to the men and women I created, when I really began to write"⁶. As a feminist, Sahgal, through the character of Mara, vocalizes her voice against illogical and imposed 'higher morality', which women have to carry on the name of tradition and culture. In discussion with Inder, Mara logically challenged his views on tradition, "Old useless, impossible ideas going on and on. We carry them around like dead wood on our backs. It's all ours all right, but some of it is rotten. We'll die if go on like this. Sometimes I think we are already dead." (144)

The voice of Mara is not only a vindication to the Inder's questions but a protest against the age old tradition and conventionalities, forcefully imposed upon women. Her arguments with Inder are really considerable. She is not only conscious about what she is doing but also about the horrible situations which are going on between Inder and Saroj. She makes Inder realize a bitter truth, "She is your wife all right and she has borne your children, but she is not your woman and you are not her man: she flies from you apparently in search of comfort you cannot give her." (109) She attracts readers towards the fact that marriage is not only a ceremony but it is a bondage that demands reciprocal involvement.

Sahgal has depicted her male protagonists Inder and Vishal as two different personages with different styles and contents. If Inder is a conformist, having traditional views about women, Vishal is in favor of women's liberation. If Inder's character reveals the challenges

which women have to pass-through, Vishal proves the possibilities of changes in the phallocratic norms. Through the character of Inder, Sahgal has tried to depict the narrow mindedness of the modern educated man. His conventional views about the female virginity are really humiliating.

In the reply of the degrading and humiliating attitude of Inder, Sahgal defends feminism through Vishal in a very logical manner, “The biological urge is supposed to be much stronger in men. So it is they who should be kept under restraint and not allowed to roam free to indulge their appetites.”(197)As a liberal feminist Sahgal portrays Vishal as a supporting agent of Saroj’s issue. She believes, “there must be a man to guide women through the difficult task of being equal.”⁷

In the novel, Saroj, Vishal and Mara seem as advocating the issue of women’s mental and physical liberation that they should not be treated mere as an appendage but as an individual entity. About Sahgal’s humanitarian attitude Shyam M. Asnani rightly remarks-

Permissive in outlook, she stands for the new humanism and new morality according to which woman is not to be taken as a mere toy, an object of lust and momentary pleasure, but man’s equal and honored partner...⁸

Thus NayantaraSahgal expresses her views that any relationship cannot be maintained by one person alone and that women need not to make continuous sacrifices in order to please men or rather husbands. She admonishes that this is the high time for women to realize their rightful place in marriage and that both the partners stand on equal level in marriage. She also believes that if honesty and sincerity is significant in marriage, this is utmost important for a person to be true to oneself. Failing this, the person might lose his identity. Though, NayantaraSahgal’s heroines acquire consciousness gradually, the process of their development is slow yet their goal is clear and their consciousness makes them stand apart from others.

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