

STATUS OF WOMEN IN MARRIAGE IN NAYANTARA SAHGAL'S SELECT NOVELS

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ABSTRACT

Nayantara Sahgal is a prolific writer and her literary canon consists of eight novels, two autobiographies, somenon fictional works. Several articles and short stories of her have been published in leading newspapers and magazines. The present paper deals a historical survey of the subordinate position of women and this exploitation in various ways. It also studies the genesis and different stages and strands of Women's Liberation Movement and how it has affected the ethos, literature and criticism in our time.

In her earlier works, Nayantara Sahgal depicts marriage as an emotionally stifling and tyrannical institution for women. Most of her characters like Rose, Sonali, Simrit, Saroj, Devi are victims of gender-oppression. Marriage for a man who "Takes her," means enlargement of his existence. He enjoys both the worlds: of home and of career. It permits him progression and self-advancement.

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Key words : marriage, status, suppression, gender role,

Helmer: Before everything else, you're a wife and a mother

Nora : I believe that before everything else I'm human being-just as much as you are...
or at any rate I shall try to become one.

-Ibsen , A Doll's House

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In her earlier works, Nayantara Sahgal depicts marriage as an emotionally stifling and tyrannical institution for women. Most of her characters like Rose, Sonali, Simrit, and Nishi are victims of gender-oppression. Marriage for a man who “Takes her,” means enlargement of his existence. He enjoys both the worlds: of home and of career. It permits him progression and self-advancement.

Marriage is the deepest as well as the most problematic of all human relations. Sociologists define it as “Cultural phenomenon which sanctions a more or less permanent union between partners conferring legitimacy on their offspring.” Religiously marriage is supposed to be the holy union of two souls and bodies.

In Christianity, the first parents were made “bone of one bone and flesh of one flesh.” In marriage, oneness, companionship and mutuality are stressed, and it is assumed that the interests of the husband and wife are one, that whatever is for the benefit of the one is for the benefit of the other also.

Despite these idealized concepts of marriage, woman in reality is essentially a subservient partner in marriage. Marriage often does not mean companionship or equality for her, rather it is a trap which negates her rights to individuality, independence and self-realization. She is subjugated, marginalized and sidelined and usually her position is no better than the poor, oppressed and racial minorities like the blacks. The “power politics,” to use a phrase from Kate Millett, operates in a subtle manner in the institution of marriage, reducing the status of a woman to merely a “utility item,” an object for decoration, for possession and for man’s sexual gratification. Marriage turns out to be an institution of oppression for her in various forms rather than of her protection for which it was primarily instituted.

Sahgal delineate with keen perception and sensitivity the problems and sufferings of women in marriage, who feel entrapped, oppressed and doomed to the care of husband and home, and show their reaction to it in their novels. Some of their women accept their fate unhesitatingly, but most of them gasp for freedom, and gradually reject the stereotype by going in for separation or for divorce to live a meaningful life. However, in the ultimate analysis Sahgal find that the tradition of family is very strong, and thus make a strong plea for the preservation of it, by inviting men to involve themselves in it.

Since the woman is “given” in marriage, she became his “half” and takes his name, his religion, family and class. She is virtually reduced to the status of a “nurse-maid” or a “nanny” of the children. Before marriage, woman is made by her parents and after marriage, as Balzac puts it, “a wife is what her husband makes her.”⁸

She eventually finds, as Germaine Greer observes, that after marriage her life has “changed radically, but not her husband’s.”⁹

However, most of these women refuse to accept the polarization of sexes. They do not want to define themselves in relation to men and hence seek identity and individuality in their own way. When they realize that they are being used and abused, they turn subversive of the tradition of being submissive and conforming persons, asserting their individuality and “consciousness” which are pre-requisites for women’s liberation.

Throughout history, women have been appropriated as sexual objects Karl Marx says, “marriage... is in contestably a form of exclusive private property.”¹⁰

However, Sahgal's women do not feel to assert their individuality or defy the social institutions easily. The concept of woman as subservient to men (as preached Manu), and as man's property is deep-rooted in Indian tradition as well. According to the popular myth, woman is Paraya Dhan whose custodians are her parents till the time she is handed over to her rightful owner, her husband. The husband in turn feels privileged to treat her as his personal property or his possession. Sahgal strongly condemns the attitudes which reduce woman to an object. Sahgal is not a staunch feminist and subscribes only "to the idea of it, though not to each and every aspect of it."¹⁶

Som in Sahgal's *The Day in Shadow* draws immense pleasure in showing off his wife as his "personal possession." He would often boast before his friends: "Look what I've got, Good enough to keep under lock and key."¹⁹

Som treats his wife Simrit as a priceless object good enough for his personal pleasures. As a husband he is happy with the thought that his job is finished by adorning his wife with jewellery and fine expensive things. Simrit, however, finds the materialistic world of Som, consisting of beautiful and choicest cloths, jewels and trips abroad, quite meaningless. She only craves for some goal, some meaning beyond the world of self-advancement, a "world whose texture is kindly."⁽⁸⁹⁾

A thousand years from now a woman will still want and need a master, the man who will own and command her – and that's the man she'll respect. ²¹

Simrit in *The Day in Shadow*, after divorce, does her best to bring up their children. When the son Brij grows up, Som, the father, tempts him with luxurious goods, viz. a record player, a car etc., and promises to send him abroad too. He succeeds in his strategy and gets the custody of the boy. Instead of becoming support to the mother the grown-up son too prefers to live with his father to enjoy a more comfortable and luxurious life.

In a patriarchal society, the male child is always preferred as he perpetuates the father's name. Som does not take the daughters back because daughters mean a lot of expenditure in terms of their dowry at the time of their marriage. Hence he leaves the daughters for his estranged wife to look after, who is already struggling under the financial burden of a brutal divorce settlement. Even when women are free from the bondage of marriage, a child becomes a new bondage.

Sahgal's marital morality as revealed in her works is based on honesty, mutual trust, consideration, understanding and freedom. She assails selfishness, pretence, self-centredness which result in schism and subsequently in marital breakdown. Traditionally, her women are taught to stay acquiescent, subdued, silent and suffering, but like Rose, Simrit, they show signs of awakening, reject the stereotype and speak out the truth. They have lived half of their as submissive and conforming persons; henceforth, they are going to be subversive and "free" beings. The "femininity" is equally imposed upon her women characters.

Sahgal in *The Day in Shadow* also reveals the ubiquitous "pattern of behaviour." Som Raman, a business magnate, agrees to divorce his wife for ultimate commercial benefits. Also, in order to take revenge on his wife Simrit, he imposes cruel divorce terms on her in a satanically shrewd way. Simrit, out of ignorance and good faith signs the consent terms without really reading them. Simrit's efforts to get rid of these unfair, injudicious terms – "the document (that) trapped and maimed her" (39) – mutually and amicably, fail. Simrit is a woman who is "bleeding to death with taxes."⁽¹⁴⁶⁾ She has been "used as convenience."⁽¹⁶⁸⁾ Even after divorce her husband, in order to save his own income tax, thrust cruel consent terms on her according to

which she has to pay “huge taxes” (55) on the shares worth six lacs, which are presently in her name but will go to her son Brij, aged sixteen, after nine years, i.e. when he attains the age of twenty- five.

Simrit pleads with Som’s lawyer: “I don’t want the shares left in my name. As long as they are, I’ll have to pay this crippling tax and whatever I earn will just be wiped out by the tax.”(56) The answer in response to her request overtly reveals the narrow, money-minded

make attitude: “Because, Mrs. Raman, there would be a big gifts tax if we made a trust.”(56) The lawyer believes that these terms are quite responsible and were drawn with the consent of both the parties: “I must remind you, Mrs.Raman,” Moolchand continues in the same formal vein, “ that this was negotiated settlementto which gave consent.”(60) Simrit meets Som to appeal to his conscience and to find some way out but he proposes a fresh agreement, which is more cruel than the previous one. Simrit is horrified to hear his irresponsible suggestion.

Simrit continues to be in a state of agony till Raj angelically emerges to protect her and later marries her. While Som belongs to the artificial and material world of rat race, Raj’s world is different. Opposed to the attitude of banal calculations is the spirit of humanism that Raj, a Christian, embodies in his relationship with Simrit. Simrit does not leave Som for Raj’s sake; she only shares his friendliness and tenderness through later both are tied in matrimonial knot. While Som never tries to fathom her depth, with Raj she has a more satisfying and absorbing relationship. Raj not only shakes her benumbed mind to awakening but makes her shed her shadows and live as a bold, assertive woman. But ironically, somewhere deep down, the patriarchal attitudes are embedded in Raj too. Raj very suddenly announces his marriage to Simrit before his elderly friend Ram Krishnan, without even consulting her and giving her time to think over .Simrit is surprised at the abrupt announcement, but then accepts it silently.(231-32)

Sahgal here effectively reveals the predicament of a woman after divorce. She purposely chooses an intelligent, sensitive, and aware woman. Who is a writer and a freelance journalist, but who is very shrewdly trapped in a brutal divorce settlement, to show that a woman can be easily used by a man for his convenience.

In Rich Like Us (1985) once again Sahgal delves in the problems of Post- Independence India. Sonali, an IAS officer, finds herself a square peg in a round hole due to the cramping working conditions and corruption rampant everywhere. The novel is set against the back drop of emergency and the evils arising out of it are disgusting. The roads peopled by policemen, the forced demolishing of the slums, the cruelly imposed vasectomies’ are just the tip of the iceberg.

The parallel story of an English woman Rose married to an Indian delineates the marked difference between the culture of the occident and the orient. Life for Rose in India is enervating, and unfortunately she pays a heavy price by her ruthless murder. Tall talks of equality, programs to facilitate agrarian development, perpetual harping on Indian cultural heritage by leaders served as tools to masquerade in Ground realities were shocking.

Rose, the English woman marrying Ram, is the Sita figure in the novel. There is an inexplicable fatalism about her – her yielding to Ram's persuasions and her decision to sail to India against warnings by her parents. Ironically in spite of all her experience of the male species, and even with the knowledge that Ram had been married, she fatalistically walks into his life. There was something romantic about her attitude to Ram. Rose desperately longs for a child when she first sees Dev, Ram’s son from his first wife Mona. She thinks that Mona enjoys the status of the mistress of the house because she has produced a son and performed her role as “a vehicle for the next generation” while women are

intended.”(63-64) Her desire for a son remains unfulfilled and ironically she is got murdered years later at her step-son Dev’s behest whose care Mona had made Rose’s duty at the time of her own death.

The cold war between Rose and Mona abetted by women visitors disgusts Rose until they are reconciled after Mona's attempt to commit suicide. But this was not the end of her troubles. There is the Marcella affair which leads to her separation from Ram for five years. In all her vicissitudes it is Sonali who remains a friend and who fights for her right to property. And finally she is murdered. But people are made to believe that she invited the death on herself.

The story of Rose is the story of several Indian widows. In the name of Sati many women are murdered. How voluntary are voluntary deaths? One can see the parallel between the accounts of Sati found in Sonali's father's trunk and the Sati of Rose. In both cases the deaths are not voluntary but forced. But like a phoenix Rose dies so that her son, rather fosterson, may live. He had forged her signature to withdraw, money from the bank and has now become a Cabinet Minister. She lives and dies pathetically much like the beggar whom she has always cared for. She fails to fight for her legitimate rights and how could she give hands for the beggar.

Marriage for man means getting all the comforts at every level while for woman it means a life of total dedicated service to a master. Sahgal envisions marriage as a sweet harmonious relationship based on mutual understanding, depth and truth, “women are persons not possessions” is the note echoed in all her works.

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