

QUEST FOR IDENTITY OF WOMEN IN NAYANTARA SAGHAL'S SELECT NOVELS

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ABSTRACT

In the novels of the Indian English women writers like Kamala Markandaya , Anita Desai, NayantaraSahgal and R.P.Jhabvala we discover that Indian women have remained more chained to their circumstances than liberated, more tradition-bound off from their shackles and have moved towards freedom. But the trend has not been firm enough. A restlessness, an uneasiness, a kind of turbulence persists even in their traditional, transitional or liberated states. They are all in a state of unsettlement – seeking something which always deceives them. Thus they suffer at various levels and emerge, even in their victory, as personalities 'more sinned against than sinning'.

Key words: female quest, women's identity, liberation of women.

This paper seeks to evaluate and examine how NayantaraSahgal, a prominent Indian-English woman novelist, through the portrayal of variegated female characters and dramatization of 'real-like life' conflicting situations, dichotomies, marital tensions and domestic traumas, undertakes the quest for female identity in her eight fictional works. The problem is significant in that she is not only a sensitive woman artist imagination, but has also been subjected to these problems in her own life, thus lending the quest theme a peculiar note of authenticity and immediacy.

Sahgal's entire fictional corpus revolves round the twin themes, first-the political one, that India is passing through a transitional period, so the Indians must adjust themselves to the changing times: second – the lack of communication between people, especially between husband and wife, results in unhappiness and prevents human fulfilment. The novelist herself makes it clear that each of her novels "more or less reflects the political era we are passing through." But along with the political theme, she also portrays the modern Indian woman's search for individual freedom and self-realization. She delineates both the motifs in a very subtle and intricate manner.

A Time to be Happy (1958) is primarily concerned with the socio-political life of the turbulent period of Indian history just before the advent of Independence. It throws broad hints about the novelist's advocacy of woman's individual freedom, which becomes central motif in the later novels. Maya is Sahgal's first woman who struggles to free herself from marital bondages as her "traditional upbringing makes her marriage to the Anglicized Harish, a sterile, if exotic bloom." She is the first of Sahgal's trapped women seeking escape into extra-marital arms."

In spite of his western education, Sanad has a profound respect for tradition; he is not an Anglicized puppet. Acutely aware of the political and social forces, he is drifted into the spate of nationalism, learns Hindi and spinning and contemplates to switch over to dhoti-Kurta style of dress. His employer, Mr. Trent, notices all these activities and warns Sanad, but he boldly informs him that nothing is wrong with his activities and the steps which he has been taking are only to familiarize himself with his own country. He feels unhappy and bewildered of having been alienated by his upbringing.

After his marriage to Kusum, who comes from a nationalist background, Sanad's inner conflict about his rootlessness and unreal existence surfaces more often which impels him to be more of an Indian and less of a "carbon copy of an English man" After Independence, he wants to resign from the English factory, where he has been working. The main theme of the novel is awakening of Sanad to the social and political realities of newly Independence India.

Storm in Chandigarh (1969) portrays the actual situation in the 1960s of the separation of the Punjab and Haryana with Chandigarh as their common capital, which each claims exclusively as its own. "Violence" is the theme of the novel, but it is not only political, referring to the forced linguistic bifurcation of Punjab, but a multi-faceted one. It is an invisible and more subtle form of 'violence': "The infliction of one person's will on another, "or "emotional violence that a husband can cause to his wife, or vice versa". Sahgal has not only depicted man's desire to gain control over other's mind but has also analyzed deeper layers of human behavior, spotlighting the fearsome jungle of man-woman relationships.

Through the political upheavals she has reflected the emotional crisis in the marital relations of the various characters. Vishal –Leela, Inder – Saroj and Jit –Mara are the fractured couples in this novel. Vishal's marriage to Leela remained a vanishing search for communication, causing him unhappiness and untold misery. In Saroj's company Vishal feels fulfilled and redeemed, six years after the death of his wife, because of their ability to communicate with each other. There is a temperamental incompatibility between Saroj and Inder. Saroj has been brought up in a liberal atmosphere, whereas Inder is a conformist but his "traditional values are stunted and feels mocked and cheated by Saroj's loss of virginity before her marriage." Inder treats her merely as a wife and not as a person. Sex with her comes easily and satisfactorily to him and is an act complete in itself. But for Saroj emotional involvement is more important than the sexual her remark "I am alone even when Inder is here" (22) conveys her deep anguish and distress. Inder brutally tortures Saroj for her pre-marital affair, but he himself develops extra-marital relationship with Mara. Nayantara Sahgal is appalled by the fact that even in the twentieth century, there are "people like Inder who believe in two codes of conduct – one for men and the other for women"

Mara, an Indian by birth, has been brought up abroad and is more foreigner than Indian. She fails to enjoy the loving freedom given by her husband and develops illicit relations with Inder. She is able to hold Inder for a while not because she is his ideal of womanhood, but this relationship does not acquire permanence. The breaking up of this brief affair upsets Mara, but it ends well for her and her husband in that he takes this opportunity to "reach out to her" by telling her of his own unhappy experience before marriage. So a new understanding in personal relations opens out for this couple. But the future for Inder and Saroj is not promising. Saroj finds it difficult to keep on living with her husband without proper understanding. She leaves Inder apparently to start life afresh with Vishal.

In her treatment of sex Sahgal is aware that it cannot be ignored or suppressed and is a part of man-woman relationship but she relates it to the feelings behind the act, the involvement or indifference with which it is best. The attitude which governs the approach to sex goes a long way towards establishing its morality or immorality. “Sex in or outside marriage is not an unrelated or self-contained act. It is to be viewed with reference to a situation and an attitude and no single rule can help to judge it.

The Day in Shadow (1971) can be read as a sequel to Storm in Chandigarh. It is not only re-enacts the theme of marital disharmony but also has the sustained moral vision of the novelist. The Day in Shadow begins from the point where Storm in Chandigarh ends. It delineates the emotional and economical strains of divorce on a woman.

The novel narrates the story of Som and Simrit who seem to get on well during the first few years of their marriage. But Som’s inability to understand her, except as an object of physical attraction, fit only for physical pleasure and enjoyment, compels her to seek human communication outside the marital bonds. Simrit herself says to Raj, “If I’d know you well before my divorce, there might not have been any divorce. Knowing you would have taken care of one need and my marriage another”. Som treats her not as a person but as a possession. She is not only the victim of Som’s inhuman attitude but also of a system- “the Hindu dharma which maintained that a wife is her husband’s property and has no individuality outside of that system”.

Som’s finalization of a new deal of armaments depresses Simrit further and she finds herself unable to respond to her husband’s physical needs and remains “separate, excluded and rebellious”. For her, emotional involvement is far more important than the sexual relationship and it is an individual that she seeks fulfilment and expression, not as possession.

Greatly upset, she is left with no option but to seek divorce. She innocently signs on the dotted line of the “Consent Terms”, in which she has been given six lakhs worth of shares in trust for their son. She cannot use this money but is supposed to pay tax on it so that anything which she earns would be wiped out. Thus “the divorce settlement is a continuation of their marriage, it pins her down to the role of a victim and attempts to crush her desire to be free in a positive way”.

A victim of her husband’s subtle and inhuman form of exploitation, a sort of beating where “blood and bruises don’t show”, and in a bid to build a new life for herself, Simrit encounters Raj, a liberal thinker, who not only makes her understand the enormity of ‘Consent Terms’ but also helps her to regain her lost moorings, emotional as well as intellectual. Sahgal fiercely attacks the most prevalent notion of using a woman as a convenience for tax purposes by her husband even after even he has divorced her.

For Simrit, divorce does not bring freedom but confrontation with all that is orthodox in this man-centered society. Out of this struggle is born a new Simrit – a person who make choice, takes decisions and becomes aware of herself as a person. “First the mind, then the body opens up to new responses and life affirms itself in a new sense of fulfilment in her relationship with Raj which is an involving and an equal one”

But Simrit’s divorce does not mean that marriage has failed as a social institution or that it has outlived its utility. It only means that there is the need for a mature approach to marriage as it is to be nurtured with love, care and candor. In Sahgal’s world the act of living is in no way an ascetic one. Her characters inhabit a world full of desires and emotions, but they do not all abide by the conventions of the society. While most of her contemporaries treat sex without or outside marriage as a promiscuous act, and the woman who indulges in it as an immoral, Nayantara proceeds to do something different. According to her, adultery or asceticism is neither good nor

bad in itself. Raj and Simrit are in love, about to be married with the prospect of life and the fight ahead of them. The world which Nayantara prescribes as the only sane and sensitive alternative to the world of power, atrocities and greed is “the personal world of Raj and Simrit, grounded in sympathy and understanding, human communication and empathy, rather than bestial sensuality and cruel insensitivity”.

A Situation in New Delhi (1977) portrays in “rather superficial manner, the aftermath of Nehru’s death, the Naxalite movement and student unrest”. But there is no cleavage between the political and private worlds, as the main actors in both are the same. Devi is the central figure. She has strong ties with three men. She loved Michael, but refused to marry him ten years ago due to her wish to stay with her brother Shivraj with whom she has temperamental affinity. Then there is Usman briefly her lover, but more of a friend or companion. Finally, there is Shivraj Michael had been in London for ten years, when he reads the news of Shivraj’s death, during this period, he had married twice but taken divorce as he could not free himself from Devi’s bewitching charm. In the words of Nell, “you go on using them like matches because the right one wouldn’t have you years ago”. Michael decides to write Shivraj’s biography and returns to India. Time had not altered his love for Devi and he finds the same “Bewildering charm” in Devi. Usman also feels the pull for Devi and calls her “Shahbana”, the Persian name for the king’s consort. He also gave the Muslim name Rishad to Devi’s son. According to Usman, Devi’s animation was not of talk or gesture. It radiated from within, through her skin and her eyes, from the source of her being. She was a golden creature, composed of layers of light”. He had known her as “a brain, an ability, and an attractiveness”. It was only after the death of her husband when he had gone to console her and had taken her in his arms that he had known her as a woman. “The act of love had never been so simple, fulfilling and unconscious yearning in himself to know her better, deeply, as alone man and woman can know each other. And he knew beyond any doubt that the feel of her breasts under his hand and his seeking mouth was in some way setting her free”. But by common consent their love-making had rarely gone that far again and they remained true companions.

Nadira, no doubt, loved her husband Usman passionately but there was no true companionship between the two. The marital discord was not due to any contrary pulls but due to the limitations of individual natures. Nadira was both attractive and desirable but Usman’s need was for a different kind of woman – one with intelligence and receptivity of ideas. When he took a woman he took a mind as well. He had no use for just bodies. Every woman he had intimately known had been incomparably more to him than that. “It was the final irony that this had not happened with his own wife. She remained so determinedly a body”. But their marriage is saved as they continue to care for each other.

NayantaraSahgal wants women to become aware of their equal status in life. Skinny Jaipal is the new woman whose awareness of herself is not at all deliberate or unnatural. She has a passion for the act of living and involves herself fully in whatever she undertakes – it may be a lesson for history, the art of learning dance or destroying her or her mother’s possessions. She has no inhibitions and finds nothing wrong in giving herself to Rishad when she realizes that she loves him. Sahgal is a humanist and her concern with politics is just a part of her humanistic concern because each of her explorations into political life “reveals her newer and deeper insight into the human psyche”.

Rich like Us (1985), portrays Sahgal’s unconventional and feministic view that the entire social set up in India supports the male domination and that the women are exploited and victimized on all occasions – in marriage, in sexual relationships, in childbirth and even in

adultery. Ram, a business tycoon, visits London and runs into Rose, a British woman, charmed by her exquisite beauty and elegant manners, he makes an unsuccessful bid “to coax her, bully or trick her into bed.” Ram proposes to Rose and they get married to Mona, a traditional Hindu wife and now blessed with a son. Their marriage is performed according to the Hindu rites. On their return to India Rose insists on Ram’s taking a divorce from his first wife, but she is advised sanctimoniously:

“There is no divorce. Hindu marriage is not a contract. It’s a sacrament” the three of them have learnt to live under the same roof and accept each other when yet another lady Marcela walks into Ram’s life and creates a turbulence in the otherwise calm and placid life of the two women. Rose feels miserable; “the then sobbing sound of pure grief on one was meant to hear, froze Mona’s tears into Rose’s eyes”. Mona had earlier attempted to commit suicide by fire but was saved by Rose. An intimacy develops between the two and Dev, the only son of Ram, is brought up by Mona and Rose, His bride Nishi, a doll faced girl’, is selected by both of them. On her death- bed Mona takes a promise from Rose that she would look after their daughter-in-law.

The two women make an interesting contrast. One is a Hindu wife, bound to shackles of tradition and conformity, docility and acquiescence, whereas the other is a liberal and non – conformist Christian believing in instincts. But both of them are exploited by the male domination. Both love Ram passionately. Irrespective of the fact that they suffer humiliation and self-abnegation time and again, they do not leave him. In one of the conversations with Bugs (her friend), Rose reveals that the only thing she “could not bear in any circumstances would be a divorce – I could never bear to lose Ram” (216). Emotional and sensitive, both the women become victims at the hands of the practical and self-centered Ram.

As a foil to this relationship, we have another couple – that of Marcella and Brian – quite practical, accommodating and understanding. At Marcella’s behest, Ram and Rose go to London and establish a boutique at Harrods. It is here that Ram unravels his mind to Rose of living separately but of course without taking a divorce from her so that he can ‘keep himself free (and pure) so that he and Marcella could evolve the perfect companionship”(201). Unable to comprehend his demeanor, Rose is only forced into this humiliating and tormenting situation. Towards the end of the novel, when Rose has been got murdered by her step-son Dev and Ram is lying in a comma, Marcella and Brian come to India to see Ram. They are shocked to see him in that condition. They seek the help of Sonali to recreate a period of history. Marcella and Brian make a happy and harmonious couple, they care for each other and seek their happiness in their ventures. They respect each other’s independent identity and point of view. In between the polarities of the two couples, we have a very touching, pure and pristine love between two young bureaucrats Sonali and Ravi, which never fructifies into marital relationships for two contrary things—hesitation to speak out on the part of the other. Ravi has been always yearning to make “uncorrupted offerings” (201). His taciturnity is unfortunately misconstrued for his being “so rigid, so bossy, so selfish” Sonali says: “If I married him I’d have to agree with him all the time. Of course we aren’t going to get married and I don’t think he loves me anymore, but I am, oh, I still am in love with him” (203).

Plans for Departure (1986), marks a departure from Sahgal’s earlier novels in that the novelist has not only cast her net wider but has also made a non-Indian and non-Hindu character the protagonist. Miss Anna Hanesen, young, intelligent and pretty Danish girl, who is in love with Nicholas, plans to visit India before they are married. In India she works as an Assistant to Sir NitinBasu and elderly researcher in the fictional town called Himapur. Here she is introduced

to Henry, the District Magistrate of the town, and Marlowe Croft, the missionary wanting to establish a church and preach Christianity.

It is through Anna Hansen, the central consciousness of the novel, that we are given a glimpse into the private lives of the two British gentlemen. Henry and Stella have been portrayed as a couple whose lives are distraught because of their temperamental differences had been political. Stella was a soldier's daughter and granddaughter and had been brought up on Mutiny legend and 'ore'. Stella believes in pomp and show, the smugness and superiority, characteristic of the British colonizers, whereas Henry is liberal and sympathetic to the Indian subjects. The secret attraction between Stella and Pryor is revealed clandestinely and Stella leaves Himapur with her daughter Jennie. Only towards the end of the novel do we learn that they (Stella and Pryor) are married. Despite the fact that Stella has left Henry for good, he has been giving the impression to the world that she would return to him. It is for the first time that the novelist has changed her focus. Rather than protesting against the woman's subjugation in the male dominated society, she is highlighting the fact that for real marriage both the partners have to be sincere, liberal and compassionate temperament, his marital life is embittered and frustrated because Stella has not been responsive in returning the love and care, sincerity and appreciative understanding to Henry.

The marital relationship between Marlowe Croft and his wife Lulu is also fractured for the same reasons, i.e. - lack of healthy understanding and proper communication. Both have been secretive and insincere to each other. Both expect the other to be tolerant and accommodative. Marlowe has married her "not for love" (p.146) but for making use of her in his so-called missionary activities. Utterly neglected by her husband, she feels stifled and decides to leave him but to leave Himapur is not easy for her. She therefore plans to go to her parents seeking the help of Sir Nitin and Anna Hanesen. Marlowe comes to know about her plans there are sufficient hints in the novel to suggest that she has been murdered by him notwithstanding the impression he creates on the mourners that it is a case of an accidental fall from the hills resulting in her eventual death.

As opposed to these two discordant couples, we have the instance of Anna and Nicholas making a happy and harmonious marital life. Their life is marked by emotional fulfilment not only because they have been caring for each other's demands, but also because they do not expect much from each other. They have been discreetly practical, knowing and accepting each other's inadequacies and follies. But they do not doubt or question each other. The success of their marital life is based on mutual give-and-take. They are willing to acknowledge each other's independent identity. That is why Anna is brave enough to make confession that she had loved and admired Henry and that "She had fallen in love with vision, not merely a man" (191). Again, Anna has assured her granddaughter Gayatri since her infancy that there are mysteries: "Why and whom one loved was the most ineffable of them. And one loved certain people so deadly so without beginning or end that their birth or death made no difference to the loving" (212).

The title of the novel is significant in that the departure of the three female characters is planned differently; whereas Mrs. Marlowe's plans for departure have been foiled by her callous and insensitive husband, Stella and Robert "had discussed their plans for a life together" (194) much before she left Henry, and in the case of Anna, the plans for departure from Himapur result in her matrimony with Nicholas, The novel is replete with intrigues and cunning so far the life of earlier two characters is concerned. The mystery shrouding their relationships as well as the departure of Stella and the murder of Mrs. Croft has been given a subtle artistic treatment in the novel.

From the foregoing discussion of Sahgal's eight novels it is evident that there has been a visible progression in the vision of the novelist in that the female protagonists in the earlier novels have been vaguely craving for "the" air of freedom and freshness" and struggling "to break off the orthodox Indian conventions and moribund tradition" which make people fear each other, whereas in the later novels we see that the women of Sahgal's fictional world have come out of the shackles of bondage in their struggle to regain their self-abnegated identity. Moreover, their freedom is not restricted to the superficial aspects such as in the matters of dress, eating habits, smoking, drinking, etc... But something deep inside the individuals, which can be attributed to the author's deeply rooted humanistic attitude to love, marriage and divorce – aspects so central to the female world.

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