

**QUEST FOR IDENTITY IN SAHGAL'S *STORM IN CHANDIGARGH*
AND A *SITUATION IN NEW DELHI***

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Identity is concerned with the self-esteem and self-image of an individual, a gender, a community, a class, a race or sex or a nation. So far as sex and gender identities are concerned, these are the quest for equality and dignity for their progress and development. The multiple identities of women, distribution of their gender roles in distinct and dominant cultures and their reflection of class position have been discussed in this paper.

The Indian women novelists viewed feminism as an expression of resentment at the unjust treatment meted out to women. According to them Feminism intends to rebel against the hostile environment in which a woman is forced to live. It is a struggle against the hardships, neglect and dual moral standards to which women are subjected. The new woman's demand for her rightful place, recognition and respect due to her is prompted by an inner urge to make her existence a meaningful one.

Women in Nayantara Sahgal's novels question the validity of the accepted set of values and rebel against the existing moral codes and social norms which deny women the oxygen of freedom that nourishes individual self. To view them as mere champions of feminism is doing them injustice. Sahgal's women refuse to be an acquiescent, suffering and sacrificing lot. They are women who are conscious of their emotional needs and hence cry for a change of order that starve them of individual fulfillment. They are women who long for an atmosphere congenial for self-expression and conducive to self-fulfillment. The hardship and suffering involved in fighting against an established order, the shattering experience of divorce and the resultant alienation between parents and children form the thematic concern of Sahgal. Her women strive to establish a new order with changed standards where women can be their true selves and where there is no need for hypocrisy. They believe that characters to be judged not by chastity of body but purity of heart. These women wish to herald a new morality which demands accommodation of individual longings for self-fulfillment and seeks consideration not for just the deed but the heart and feelings too. Their concept of freedom is not confined to the realms of social and economic freedom. It is the freedom of mental make up and emotional attitude.

Sahgal is the only Indian woman to write in English who has consistently rejected a philosophy of endurance or compromise for women trapped in unfulfilling marriages. Her novels project divorce as a traumatic but unavoidable resolution to an irrevocably broken marriage, necessary if the woman is to live with dignity and self-respect. Real life experiences of marriage based on 'the shocking assumption of inequality', a sustaining relationship with another man, a divorce which imposed an impossible financial burden. (SIC,62)

Sahgal's women characters are the portrayal of variegated female characters and dramatization of 'real-like life' conflicting situations, dichotomies, material tensions and domestic traumas, undertakes the quest for female identity in her eight fictional novels. The problem is significant in that she is not only a sensitive woman artist writing in India today, gifted with keen observation and an artist imagination, but has also been subjected to these problems in her own life, thus leading the quest theme, a peculiar note of authenticity and immediacy. Her entire fictional corpus revolves round the twin themes, first the political one that India is passing through a transitional period and 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 fulfillment. 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.

Liberal in outlook Sahgal believes in the "new humanism" and "new morality", according to which woman is not to be taken as 'a sex object and glamour girl, fed on fake dreams of perpetual youth, lulled into passive role that requires no individuality', but as man's equal and honored partner. There is a happy blend of two sensibilities in her work the sensibility of an artist and the sensibility of a humanist. As a humanist, she is for an unfettered freedom and 'pleads for the new marital morality, based on mutual trust, consideration, generosity and absence of pretence, selfishness and self-centeredness. She is intensely moral in her artistic vision and has great respect for the affirmative values of life.

The delineation of the twin motif, political turmoil outside and the private torment of broken marriage within one's own self, does not adversely affect her artistic integrity. Sahgal is neither for tradition nor for modernity. She appears to choose the best out of the two. Her some characters have only one passion: "it is the longing to be free, freedom from all restraint in word and deed being their monomania. They want to be fully alive and themselves. She ruthlessly attacks the age-old wrongs that the society has inflicted on the Indian woman and pleads for an honoured place of equality for her so that every marriage becomes a fair give-and-take partnership. According to her, the lack of communication and understanding is the main cause of marital discord which can be overcome if that "Oxygen of understanding" is created in the atmosphere of freedom" (SIC, 55)

Strom in Chandigarh not only portrays the forced linguistic bifurcation of Punjab in 1960 but also about the 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 others mind has also analyzed deeper layers of human behavior, spot lighting the fearsome jungle of man-woman relationships.

Through the political upheavals Sahgal has reflected the emotional crisis in the marital relations of various characters. Vishal – Leela, Inder-Saroj and Jit-Mara are the fractured couples in the 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 India is a conformist but his 'traditional values are stunned and (he) 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 of complete in itself. But Saroj's emotional involvement is more important than the sexual

relationship. Her remark “I am alone even when Inder is her” (SIC, 44) conveys her deep anguish and distress. Inder brutally tortures Saroj for her pre-marital affair, but he himself develops extra-marital affair with Mara. 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 relationship with Inder. She is able to hold Inder for a while not because she is his ideal of womanhood, but because she is bold and passionate which Saroj is not. 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 relationship 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 to start life afresh with Vishal.

In the 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 beset. The attitude which governs the approach to sex goes on a long way towards establishing its morality or immorality. According to Sahgal, 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’. Saroj is not guilty. Guilt arises from the way one looks at it. According to her, “Saroj’s pre-marital act of sex has nothing to do with the pollution of flesh, promiscuity or immorality.

The resolution worked out by Saroj is built around Sahgal’s firm belief in the necessity of taking a stand when one’s individuality, integrity and self-respect are threatened. The need for women to resist emotional blackmail to fight against their own passivity is defined through her. Described by author as the symbol of ‘a tradition, a patient, enduring passivity’, Saroj yet rouses herself to change her life. Sahgal thus poses a positive challenge to the status quo, confidently suggesting that a woman’s existence need not necessarily be an external bondage. Saroj’s resolution is not the result of a gradual inability to accept and endure a repressive marriage. For years, she had unprotestingly and sadly borne the humiliation of being constantly despised by her husband had to patch up the gaping holes in the marriage by clinging desperately to passing moments tenderness. The moment of resolution, of deciding that life was meant to be more than a silent martyrdom, is almost an epiphanic experience for Saroj, Assured by Vishal that her purity was untouched by a sexual encounter, she miraculously frees herself from the trap of self-recrimination created by Inder’s attitude. To Vishal, it seems as if she has come out of the ‘blind alley’ in which she had so long been floundering.

With narrative tact and subtle understanding of reality of the Indian situation, Sahgal does not let Saroj immediately consider leaving her husband. That can only be the ultimate step when all other avenues have failed; for the moment she is only determined that the relationships must re-define its parameters. The task of severing the emotional bonds is by no means easy. Saroj is filled with the old yearning to reach out to her husband, to enter his private world beset with fears and doubts but she knows that no change is possible without coming to terms with old problems. She did not want any Inder, or ever again, to live in uncertainty with him. Determined to break down walls, she attempted to explain her own need to talk to Vishal. She senses his refusal to understand, his withdrawal but for the first time, is not troubled by guilt or even

compassion. She, who had always secretly cherished her own inviolable self, is again led by Vishal to a moment of profound realization. When he urges her that life is too precious to keep oneself in storage; she is filled with the belief that ‘life need not be just got through. It could be taken into one’s own hands and understood even changed’. With this new found faith, she walls out of her home, knowing that she had tried but failed, taking with her the two things-her children and her roses.

Saroj’s departure is a move towards personal freedom and the rejection of the role thrust upon her. Saroj learns that endurance is not a virtue as passive god cannot oppose active evil. She has to reach out to create with Vishal the relationship which Inder has denied. She has realized that;

Mere living together under the same roof, only the accumulation of a life time’s halts, without any real bond of intimacies, in spite of sex and children, the human substance between them dwindling, is nothing but the mockery of marriage. True living lies in understanding each other, in mutual respect and trust, honesty and freedom, without a thought of dominance. (SIC, 20-22)

Sahgal’s unusual concept of female virtue is particularly seen in her handling of pre-marital and extra-marital sexual relationships. In a society where even a close platonic relationship can be considered an act of marital infidelity. Sahgal consistently depicts such relationship from a very different standpoint. She suggests that any relationship is to be viewed with reference to a situation or an attitude. Revoking the patriarchal models of marital morality exclusively based on the wife’s sexual fidelity, Sahgal courageously creates patterns for what Shyam M. Asnani describes as a “new marital morality based on mutual trust, consideration, generosity and absence of pretence, selfishness and self-centeredness”. Such an attitude disturbs the traditional patriarchal order by placing the onus of the relationship equally on the man and the woman. The woman is freed from the sole responsibility of preserving a marriage through the abnegation of all selfish desire and expectation. A feminist does not necessarily look for an exclusion of male support and guidance but it does demand that the process of change should emerge from the woman, as a conscious attempt to re-define her life.

In Sahgal’s other novel, *A Situation in New Delhi* (1977). 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 of companion. Michael had been in London for ten years and during this period, he 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 ‘Shabana’, the Persian name for the king’s consort. According to Usman, Devi’s animation was not of the talk on gesture. He had known her as a person with an attractive train.

Nadira, no doubt, loved her husband Usman passionately but there was no true companionship between them. 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 that. It was the final irony that this had not happened with his own life. She remained so determinedly a body”. But their marriage is saved as they continue to care for each other.

Sahgal want a woman to become aware of their equal status in life. Skinny Jaipal is the new woman whose awareness of her is not at all deliberating on unnatural. She has a passion for the act of living and involves herself fully in whatever she undertakes. She has no inhibitions and finds nothing wrong in giving herself to Rishad when she realizes that she loves him. Indian women writers are finding new ways of asserting female self-hood showing increasing courage n breaking age old strictures regarding a woman’s existence.

By depicting protagonists having the courage of constructively modify, change or transform their lives, Indian women writers are helping to break the stereotype of eternally suffering Indian womanhood. From the foregoing discussion of Sahgul’s 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 fresher’ 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 the shackles of bondage in their struggle to regain their self-abnegated identity.

Abbreviation used in the paper:

- SIC- Storm in Chandigarh
- ASND- A Situation in New Delhi

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