

**FEMININE PERSPECTIVES IN THE NOVELS OF
NAYANTARA SAHGAL**

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Abstract

Feminism means the belief that women should have the same rights and opportunities as men. Feminism aims at liberating women from various manifestations of gender-based discrimination and exploitation. Nayantara Sahgal artistically uses the theories of Feminism and New Historicism side-by-side. She is the first woman novelist who has linked the theories of Feminism and New Historicism in her writings. This paper seeks to evaluate and examine how Nayantara Sahgal a prominent Indian English woman novelist, through the portrayal of variegated female characters and dramatization of real life conflicting situations, dichotomies, marital tensions and domestic traumas, undertakes the quest for female identity in her works. The problem is significant in that she is not only a sensitive woman with artistic imagination, but has also been subjected to these problems in her life, thus lending the quest theme a peculiar note of authenticity and immediacy.

Key Words: Nayantara Sahgal, Feminism, Patriarchal & Equality.

Introduction

Indian women novelists have given a new dimension to Indian literature. Indian English Literature has developed over some time and written in English did not start in a day. It took many years and several distinguished personalities to bring the present status and distinction to Indian English literature. Indian literature is not only about novels, but it is also poetry and short

stories. Before the rise of novels, several women writers composed songs, short stories and one-act plays. It is still believed that women are the upholders of the rich Indian tradition of fables, story-telling and more. In the middle of the nineteenth century, more women started to write in the English language. English literature has witnessed several changes in the writing patterns. Women novelists have included the recurring female experiences in their writings. It has affected the cultural and language patterns of Indian literature. They have brought new strategies in the whole context of Indian writing. Now-a-days readers enjoy reading the novels written by the new age women writers. “In the twentieth century, women’s writing was considered as a powerful medium of modernism and feminist statements. The last two decades have witnessed phenomenal success in feminist writings of Indian English literature.”

The majority of the Indian writers were concerned in one way or the other issues regarding women. They were directly, idealistically or realistically depicting the place of women in the society and intending to bring about change therein. Yet their women characters seem to be under the dominating influence of their male writers. The female protagonist remains under the impact of their creator’s emotions and ideas. These incited women to become writers and they present the reality of the world. Some young and energetic women writers both men and women concentrated on the themes of women’s struggles. They began to write different fiction in English. Many writers stayed in foreign countries and wrote about the situations in India. They described their concept and idea at their home and they wrote about it in their novels.

Today a women novelist is in England, lacking either a room or her financial independence. They can ordinarily hold her with the male of the species. Women are natural storytellers even when they don’t write or publish. In India women, writers have since made their mark in Indian fiction in English. Art, environment and society are inextricably intertwined reflecting the socio-political, socio-cultural and socio-economic considerations. Cultures, traditions, beliefs, values and relationships in society find expression in various forms and patterns of writing. As a consequence, many branches of literature have come up. Among these the feminist and socio-political studies assume significance.

Due to the subjugation, oppression and exploitation are of women by men. Feminism has occupied a significant place in literature and criticism. The postmodern period brought about a significant change in literary theory. The women writers, who were sensitive to feminine issues, gave a new language to articulate feminine sensibility. This gave rise to feminist criticism or literary feminism. The feminist criticism is not merely confined to theories and definitions but most importantly, it led to the evolution of female discourse.

Feminism means the belief that women should have the same rights and opportunities as men. Feminism aims at liberating women from various manifestations of gender-based discrimination and exploitation. It is an expression that refers to a movement for securing equality between the sexes in all walks of life—social, economic and political. It broadly intends to secure womanhood freedom in all aspects. A feminist postulates that women should be on par with men. Toril Moi comments, “The terms ‘feminist’ or ‘feminism’ are political labels indicating support for the aims of new women’s movement which emerged in the late 1960s” The movement for women’s equality with men is achieved to an extent. Yet, a woman is treated as a subordinate. Simone de Beauvoir aptly says: The situation of women is that she is a free and autonomous being like all human creatures—nevertheless finds herself living in a world where men compel her to assume the status of the other.

Feminism is a critique of male dominance and the male point of view which has forced itself upon the world. Sexual difference defines a woman and causes her objectification or the

process that appears in the culturalist ideology of gender. Feminist consciousness posits and refers to reality, regarding women's socio-sexual existence it is also said that outside literature the word feminist was invented by a French Socialist, Charles Fourier, in the early nineteenth century. It was used for asking franchises and was later on extended to describe a particular stand in the women's movement that stressed the uniqueness and difference for women rather than seeking equality, even to the extent of claiming superiority of women over men.

From the historical point of view feminism came to be perceived as simply anti-family, anti-marriage, anti-children, anti-religion, not to mention anti-men. Feminism presented the family as a kind of prison, with a working career on the outside a kind of liberation. Feminism in the 1970s tended to portray home life as some sort of idiocy that no enlightened woman would be interested in meanwhile, the legal regime promoted by feminism in the West served to damage the position of housewives and mothers, with no-fault divorce, anti-discrimination law and affirmative action to promote women. Feminist theory hates capitalism as patriarchy is often simply equated with war racism capitalism, feminism with socialism, environmentalism, and multi-culturalism everything that could be considered as progressive.

The concept of feminism end plates from time to time and place to place. Feminism means different things to different people, ranging from a wish to change and challenge the whole existing order of things to the desire to bring about more balanced and equality between the sexes and achieve respectable individual liberty for women with their instincts and characteristic instinct. Though equality with all its implications at various levels of society is a major issue, one of the fundamental areas where this equality matters and is desired even by the most conservative standards of feminism is in the area of marriage. The female categorization as a sex object is vehemently opposed. Women who were troubled by sexism within the family or their personal lives were attracted to feminism. The goal of feminism became for some to eliminate sexist oppression by the patriarchal society.

Nayantara Sahgal artistically uses the theories of Feminism and New Historicism side-by-side. This is obvious in all her novels. She analyses interprets and ideological constructs the historical events that had passed through the country, thereby narrating them combining the feminine concept. A close link between Nayantara Sahgal's life and the subject of her novels is borne out by her preoccupation with politics and also by her constant examination of marital problems. The political themes are often combined with the theme of man-woman relationships, their marital problems, their temperamental incompatibility, the problems arising out of their ego or submissiveness and finally, the problem of the status of women in society are skilfully woven in her writings. She is the first woman novelist who has linked the theories of Feminism and New Historicism in her writings.

Nayantara Sahgal's entire fictional corpus revolves around 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. 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.

Similarly, when Nayantara Sahgal takes up any feministic theme, she does deal with only the questions of marriage and divorce, sexuality and woman's equality with the man but also the cultural, religious and social environment in which a woman lives as well as the question of love, hatred and jealousy and certain other human emotions and values. She also dwells on the

significance of essential humanism, the question of freedom, the growth of individuality, the quest for self-fulfilment, the impact of religion on man's life, various human values and the antithesis between idealism and pragmatism, illusion and reality.

The main objectives of this research are to explore the novels of Nayantara Sahgal on a feminist basis and to find how her feminist concerns help women in identifying the self-concept – a continual quest for self-discovery and self-realization that life has to be lived fully to be meaningful. And to find her novels the projected problems of women like personal agonies and traumas, disharmony and dissolution of marriages which are responsible for women to lead into a world of depression and impossibilities. Her novels are exploring her women characters respond to the problems in society, strive for freedom from orthodox ideals of the society and revolt against the beaten track formulations of religious ideologies.

Women in the novels of Nayantara Sahgal question the validity of the accepted set of values and rebel against the existing moral codes and social norms which denied women the oxygen of freedom that nourishes individual self. To view them as mere champions of feminism is doing them an injustice. Nayantara Sahgal's women refuse to be acquiescent suffering and sacrificing a lot. They are women who are conscious of their emotional needs and hence cry for a change of order that starves them of individual fulfilment. They are women who long for an atmosphere congenial for self-expression and conducive to self-fulfilment.

The hardship and suffering involved in fighting against an established order, the shattering experience of divorce and the resultant alienation between parents and children from the thematic concern of Nayantara Sahgal. Her women strive to establish a new order with changing standards where women can be their true selves and where there is no need for hypocrisy. They believe that character is to be judged not by chastity of the body but by the purity of heart. These women wish to herald a new morality that demands accommodation of individual longings for self-fulfilment and seeks consideration, not for just the dead 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 makeup and emotional attitude.

Storm in Chandigarh and *The Day in Shadow* are intensely personal. The writer is everywhere in these two novels. It would not be improper to say that these two novels are emotional autobiographies. In *The Day in Shadow*, Nayantara Sahgal is Simrit. She is an intelligent, sensitive and conscious woman who is a writer. However, Simrit's world comes crashing on her when she is shrewdly entrapped in a brutal divorce settlement just like the writer herself was in her real life. She confesses in *The Day in Shadow*. The settlement that Simrit and Som reach with mutual consent unsettles Simrit.

A Situation in New Delhi portrays a girl Madhu who is gang-raped by college union leaders on the university campus. Her traumas are too great to be explained for her starting life afresh is as difficult as Simrit's who walks out of the life of Som. In *Rich Like Us*, Sonali refuses to be pinned down to marriage. She craves higher studies and goes abroad to escape the harshness of marriage. But incidents and events do her life more pains than joys. In Nayantara Sahgal's novels not all husbands have been shown all barbaric, uncouth and ruthless, Simrit goes out of the life of Som. But she takes the help of Som. Her learning of him is so noticeable. Nayantara Sahgal's women suffer a different kind of atrocities. They are made an emotional sufferer. This is presented by her women protagonists.

Nayantara Sahgal's major concern in *Storm in Chandigarh* is with the disturbance and unhappiness in marriages. She feels that the cause of disturbance in the relations between man and woman partly lies in man's involvement in adultery and partly in keeping up the unnatural

position of the husband or the wife in the family. Thus, marriages are not just for sexual satisfaction but it is a mutual bond that has to be kept on equal terms with a lot of love, care and understanding. When this essence is lost, it results in disturbance and destruction. By the portrayal of young couples, Inder and Saroj, Jit and Mara, Vishal and Leela, Nikhil and Gauri, their marital, premarital and extramarital relations, cause of disturbances in marriages, unhappiness and loneliness in marriage, Nayantara Sahgal holds a mirror to the society about the exploitation of women.

Nayantara Sahgal's *The Day in Shadow* is considering almost autobiographical nature. It deals with the motive of the feminist movement strives towards the aim that women should have the same rights and opportunities as men. Though feminism is not a relatively new concept, and has always formed part of the women's liberation movement. It has been changing, in form and content with gender equality being one of the aspects. There is no doubt that feminism is today a major accepted fact of modern life with women competing with men in all walks of life. It deals with the feminist movement in the West and East, the condition of women in the past and the present and finally, novelist said the issues on Nayantara Sahgal's *The Day in Shadow*. The heroines like Simrit, Devi, Rose and Sonali grew bold enough, as she did in her life, to throw away societal shackles. They began to feel the oppressive need that the duty of self weights greater than the duty to the family or society. Women should be prepared to lead an independent life rather than submitting themselves herself to the unjust demands of society.

Nayantara Sahgal's women are not virtuous in the conventional sense but in the moral sense for they have shed all hypocrisies and pretence with their selves. Simrit and Saroj find themselves unable to be sexually involved in relationships that have lost all other meaning and their emotional withdrawal affects a distancing which helps them retain their self-respect. Devi in *A Situation in New Delhi* is not so honest with herself. Her real emotional and physical needs are at variance with what she wants to be. She has not yet arrived at the sublimation that duty demands from her. Sex for Nayantara Sahgal's women characters is not an appetite, it is a fulfilment. Their attitude towards it, itself repudiates the charge that they are sex-starved.

Nayantara Sahgal presents in her novel *Rich Like Us* the problems that contemporary women face in society and their struggle towards self-realization. She not only deals with the questions of marriage, sexuality and woman's equality with the man but also raises the question of love, hatred jealousy and certain other human emotions and values. Moreover, she also presents an antithesis between idealism and pragmatism, illusion and reality. She has a humanitarian approach and is extremely sensitive to Indian womanhood as being wronged. In *Rich Like Us*, she reflects the tension between the predicament of the contemporary Indian woman and the traditional Hindu culture. She studies the social forces working on the psychology of the Indian woman.

Sonali's struggle for self-determination is somewhat different from that of other women. She is facing destructive forces outside of her home: Rose, a close friend of Sonali, is facing this problem at the home front. Rose the foreigner is as much a picture of victimization, as is Sonali the Indian. The crumbling burden of society and custom crushes the personality of all women, Indian or Western. Rose, who appears to be quite emancipated is not so and this becomes clear in her interaction with Ram, as well as with Dev, her stepson. Rose left her people, her country and even her self-respect at times of Ram. But she is far away from the experience of contentment. It was for love that she defied her family, her parents and her religion and came to India as Ram's wife. To her Ram is the very seat of her existence and without him, she is a nonentity.

Nayantara Sahgal strongly condemns the attitudes which reduce women to an object. In her study of her and Doris Lessing, Neena Arora observes: Man considers it as normal male behaviour to satisfy his desires at both the emotional and physical level outside marriage while at the slightest hint of any deviation on her part which may not involve sex; man turns violent and hostile towards his wife and starts persecuting her.

In the novel *Plans for Departure* the protagonist Anna is not happy with boring life of staying at home and doing nothing. Her engagement with Nicholas makes her think of her future, that she would be confined to four walls. She is not a fatalist and therefore intends to free herself from the restricted life. She plans a journey through which she wanted to assert herself. Nicholas does not want her to go on a journey at this particular time especially when they were preparing for their marriage. But for Anna, this is the crucial time where she had to get to know herself and decide accordingly.

As a woman novelist, Nayantara Sahgal recognizes that her primary obligation is that of advocating the emancipation of women. She vividly describes how the woman is exploited even during the modern times by both the individuals and the society. She is deeply concerned with the failure of marital relationships, the loneliness of living and private terrors. Her women characters suffer because they refuse to submerge their individuality and cling to their identity at all costs. She shows women suffering in marriage life and then deciding to come out of the suffocating bondage by preferring divorce. Her women like Saroj, Simrit, Devi, Sonali, and Anna all leave their husbands or break the marriage which does not allow them to be free and to live life in their way.

Nayantara Sahgal's women characters struggled to preserve their identity. They sustain themselves up to an extent. When they are overburned with the trauma of loveless marriages they make themselves free. Having personally experienced the trauma of a failed marriage Nayantara Sahgal spoke of women trapped between traditional womanhood and modern individuality. She highlighted her feminist concerns through the exposure of the austerity of man-woman relationships and discontented marriages. Further, she stated that the reasons based on gender inequality marriage without emotional involvement, love without respect and sex without passion is the other reasons. Her argument towards preserving marital bonds is a relation based on mutual trust and recognition between the partners. If the partners of a marriage do not enjoy mutual love, trust and understanding, there is no point in their staying together as husband and wife. She has stressed the need of achieving a relationship between a man and woman through love and mutual interaction.

Nayantara Sahgal emphasized the need for gender education through which woman gets self-respect. The authoress viewed a society where the domination of men over women is seen in marriage, in sexual relationships, childbirth and infidelity. It is a woman who is badly treated and this is clearly shown in her novels. She is deeply concerned with the failure of marital relationships and the loneliness of living. Her women are often married psychologically. Lack of communication and mutual understanding, isolation, pain, suppression, personal agony and dissatisfaction in marriage makes women rebellious and cause the break of the marital bond. Most of her women remarry or else find companionship on mutual understanding.

Conclusion

Nayantara Sahgal holds a mirror to the postcolonial attitudes and survives for new feminine morality and new humanism in her novels. Her women characters rise against the humiliating culture which retards women's progress. They rebel against all attempts to omit women's pivotal

role in the family and society. Her women are victims of a conventional society that does not permit women to have their own identity. Nayantara Sahgal felt strongly about female exploitation and male mockery towards the issue of women's identity crisis. She demanded social justice for women, her focus being individual freedom. She represented new morality, according to which, a woman is not to be taken as a mere playing, an object of desire for temporary satisfaction, but man's equal and honoured partner. Her women characters undoubtedly reveal her feminist ideology.

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