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Breaking Patriarchies: Feminist Narratives in Nayantara Sahgal's Fiction



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ABSTRACT

Nayantara Sahgal has rendered an outstanding and remarkable contribution in enriching the Indian English literature by her thought provoking ideas and she shares an honourable status alongwith other prominent women Indian writers like Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Mahasweta Devi and Arundhati Roy . She was a celebrated figure in the feminist movement, substantiating women empowerment and their rights in a male-

dominated society. In the novels of Nayantara Sahgal, there is a sensitive depiction of the way women suffer due to the sexist bias in the patriarchal society which gives a secondary position to women and always treats them as second-rate citizens. Sahgal dreams a world which should be based on equality, sharing and harmony between the two sexes.

Key Words: Feminism, Male-dominated Society, Patriarchal, Women.

The present research paper primarily focuses on the works of renowned Indian English writer Nayantara Sahgal from the perspective of feminism because it will be a fruitful and rewarding analysis to explore the feminine sensibility in her novels. Nayantara Sahgal has given a very phenomenal and colossal contribution in enriching the Indian English literature by her thought provoking ideas which enumerate her majesty and augustness justifiably in the realm of Indian literature. She was a celebrated figure in the feminist movement, substantiating women empowerment and their rights in a male-dominated society. She played an indispensable role in raising her voice of protest against the women issues and enthusiastically involved in the socio-political activities which focussed to invigorate and improve the marginalised status of women in the Indian patriarchal society. Her novels are deeply rooted in the Indian experience, highlighting the social, political and economic realities of India. Her novels deeply delve into various feminist issues, focusing the complexities of man-woman relationship and the quest for identity. Sahgal creates strong and independent female characters who challenge the norms of the patriarchal society and strive for equality and harmoniousness. Her novels are a perfect example of egalitarianism and nondiscrimination between men and women and challenge the established perception of women as subjugated to men.

Nayantara Sahgal is the daughter of Jawahar Lal Nehru's sister Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit. Her father was an eminent barrister and an erudite scholar of Sanskrit who translated Kalhan's epic 'Rajatrangini', the history of Kashmir from Sanskrit into English. Illustrious daughter of a scholarly father, Nayantara Sahgal was born on May 10, 1927. She is an Indian woman writer in English who has earned a distinguished and commendable place among great modern Indian writers. Her fiction deals with India's elite responding to the crises born of political change and she was one of the first female Indo-Anglican writers to receive wide acclaim.

Though descent of the Nehru-Gandhi family, Sahgal developed an identity for inculcating her independent critical sense. It is but natural that politics and history inspire and underline much of her writing. Beginning with her memoir *Prison and Chocolate Cake*, which was published in 1954, Sahgal authored other political writings – *The Freedom Movement in India* and *Indira Gandhi, Her Road to Power* – along with a collection of essays, *Point of view: a personal response to life, literature and politics*. Her novels bring out Nayantara Sahgal as a writer with feminist concerns seeking independent existence of women. She sees women as victims of conventional Indian society engaged in their search for identity in her last novel *Mistaken Identity* her concept of liberty reaches its zenith where her female character is an out- and out rebel.

Nayantara Sahgal acted as an advisor to Sahitya Akademi's board for English from 1972 to 1975. She was a member of the Indian delegation to U.N. General Assembly. She also held the post of People's Union for Civil Liberties. She received the Sinclair Prize for fiction in 1986, and Commonwealth Writers Award in 1987. She was also a Fellow of the Woodrow Wilson International Centre from 1981 to 1982. The Library of Congress has twenty four works by her. Nayantara Sahgal has been active on the literary scene both as a creative writer and a political columnist for more than two decades. She has the unparalleled distinction of being the only political novelist on the Indian English Literary scene. Sahgal's literary achievement consists of eight novels, two autobiographies, some non-fictional works, and several articles and short stories published in leading newspapers and magazines. Her recent novels *Rich Like Us* (1985) and *Plans for Departure* (1986) have reinforced her position as one of the foremost Indian novelists on the contemporary scene. Her talent can be seen in full bloom in her *Rich Like Us* and her latest published novel, *The Mistaken Identity* (1988), which too has been widely applauded by the critics. In all her works there is a juxtaposition of two worlds: the personal world of man-woman relationship and the

impersonal world of politics. Her works are known for a humanistic vision and in her writings, as Jasbir Jain observes, "There is a genuine concern for human values and human beings" (Jain 9)

Feminist literature can in fact be important instrument in bringing forth the feminine values. In feminist literature woman's experience becomes the pivotal concern. Toril Moi remarks, "The word feminist or feminism is political label indicating support for the aims of women's movement which emerged in the late 1960s" (Moi 204). This literature seeks to demythologize the myth that man is the universal representative of humanity, and woman is the unnamed and the invisible. Hence the need for women writers to write their own literature which provides centrality to woman in every way - thematically, structurally and stylistically. Long before the coming of women's liberation movement, many writers talked about the oppressive conditions of women in the patriarchal society. In nineteenth century in especially we find that women writers like Jane Austen, Charlotte Bronte, Mrs. Gaskell, Dorothy Richardson, George Eliot, Virginia Woolf and Margaret Drabble forebode some of the present-day feminist issues in their respective works. Thus feminism is committed and it is a specific kind of political discourse which takes a stand against male chauvinism and sexism. It has helped in instilling necessary courage in women writers to write about their own emotions and experience, boldly and freely which were earlier considered as personal and trivial. Feminism has done a major job in raising consciousness in gender-related issues, thus promoting the goals of feminist movement and hoping for some gradual change in the banal division of gender roles.

Women are an inseparable part of human civilization and no society or country can ever progress without an active participation of women in its overall development. Although the place of woman in society has differed from culture to culture and from age to age yet one fact common to almost all societies is that woman has never been considered the equal of

man. Since times immemorial woman has been the victim of male domination and oppression and treated like a beast of burden and an object of pleasure. Shaikh M. H. Kidwai manifestly affirms, “Woman is regarded subservient to man because it is believed that she was made out of man.” (Kidwai 34). In The Bible the superiority of man is also stressed. Adam is shown as the master who gives names to all beasts and animals, and he also gives name to his wife and calls her Eve. The secondary position of women also finds manifestation in the numerical symbolism of Pythagoras who belonged to the sixth century B.C. and whose theory had great impact upon the western culture. Even in ancient India, women’s lot was no better and they were assigned secondary roles in a male-dominated society by religious bigotry and social conventions. The ancient Hindu law-giver, Manu, whose philosophy holds a notable place in the mainstream of Indian ideology and culture expresses some noble sentiments about women that where females are honoured , there the deities are pleased but where they are dishonoured, their all religious acts become futile. Manu says that a wife must remain devoted to her husband and always please him while he is alive and after his death, she should not think of any other man. Even though the husband be of bad character and seeks pleasure elsewhere he must be always worshipped as a god by a faithful wife. Elsewhere we read that a wife who has committed faults may be beaten with a rope or a short bamboo. Though the widow is strictly required to remain faithful to her husband’s memory, there is no corresponding duty on the part of the husband. After having burnt a wife, who dies before him, the husband may marry again and again. Manu divides Indian society into four Varnas: “Brahamans”, “Kshatriyas”, “Vaishyas” and “Shudras”, and the position of women has been equated with the lowest class and women were denied various religious privileges. *Judaism* too did not award equal status to woman in ancient times because a woman was unclean from a religious point of view and she was nonentity from a political point of view. Beyond ordinary household duties which she did as a slave or as a servant, she was not allowed to

share man's work in any walk of life. *Buddhism* also does not have much to say in favour of women. According to Buddhists, the company of a woman was considered to be an obstacle in the achievement of higher aims in man. Later, because of the impact of Islamic culture, the "Purdah system" came into being which further segregated women from the society. Thus, right from the dawn of civilization, double standards were set to pinpoint the roles of men and women.

There is a great discrepancy between the idealized concept of woman in Indian myths and scriptures and her actual situation in life. On the surface, she enjoys a very high status and is known as Devi, Lakshmi or Shakti, but in real life she is harassed, oppressed and tortured in various ways. Female foeticide and infanticide, sati, harassment of widows, rape, wife battering, family violence, dowry deaths in recent times are some of the visible forms of cruelty meted out to women. The comments of A. R. Gupta are quite relevant in this context, "The poorest Indian male is fortunate in having opportunities for releasing his impulse to domination and the fury of his frustrated ego, because he always has a wife whom he can treat as an inferior" (Gupta 68). The complete self-effacement or total submission on the part of a woman is considered to be the highest virtue. Traditionally, her destiny is marriage and as a married woman, she must be a *Pativarta* and worship her husband like a God because by serving him only as a woman can reach *Swarga*.

Nayantara Sahgal places her women characters, mostly with good educational background, in conflict with a male-dominated society and directs their struggle to emerge out of their shells. Though in the novels the focus is mainly on the suffering of women within marriage, yet we also get an inkling of the efforts made to adapt her personality along sexist lines before marriage. In the character of Nita in *This Time of Morning*, Nayantara Sahgal depicts the place of a woman in Indian society before marriage. Nita is the young and pretty daughter of Dr. Narang who is a strange mixture of Eastern and Western Culture. While

western life style—drinks, dance and bridge - is part of his culture, but when it comes to his daughter, he would act in the most traditional Eastern life style manner, imposing several restrictions on the activities of his ambitious daughter.

Nita's parents also want to settle down their daughter in marriage but they do not give any significance to the wishes of their daughter and force her to marry the man of their choice whom she neither loves nor admires. Nita feels utterly unhappy and a sense of despair overpowers her when she learns about her parents' decision to marry her off to a stranger. But the desire to be her own self leads her to establish a relationship with Kalyan. Her pre-marital involvement is not the result of the Western liberated life-style but it is an attempt to fulfil her inner desire for love and communication. In this way through the character of Nita, Nayantara Sahgal exposes conventional narrow-minded Indian society where life partners are chosen by the parents. Sahgal strongly attacks this social convention and names this kind of marriage and the reaction of the young girls to the decision "just organized rape." She also condemns the hypocrisies of the affluent upper classes where women are encouraged to take drinks or to smoke publically in the name of freedom and modernity, but they are not allowed to take independent decision in choosing their life partners. That means they give an appearance that they are changing but inwardly they are forced to remain traditional and narrow minded by accepting the will of their parents blindly.

Nayantara Sahgal's *The Day in Shadow* (1971) came out with the rise of women's liberation in the West. In this novel she reveals the woman's position and provokes the consciousness and criticism of society with the role of sex-separation and power-partition involved in them. Obviously along with political theme, this novel is preoccupied with the modern Indian woman's desire for sexual freedom and self-realization. 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 providing his wife jewellery and fine expensive

things. Simrit, however finds the materialistic and mundane world of Som quite hollow. Lionel Trilling remarks, “Money is the principle of the inauthentic in human existence.”⁴ Simrit finds the materialistic existence offered by her husband inauthentic and superficial, and a hindrance to her self-realization.

In Sahgal’s *Storm in Chandigarh*, Inder, the husband who himself is running after another woman constantly rebukes and harasses his wife Saroj because of her past sexual indulgence with her college mate once. Inder is frenzied by jealousy and behaves in a savage manner by torturing her physically and mentally quite often. Several times in a day he would ask her about the ‘other’ man and the number of times she has gone to bed with him and his wife has been a declared sinner by him. The husband has a social allowance and permission to torture his wife on mere suspicion of her having sexual relations with another but on the other hand the wife can do nothing to her husband if he behaves in a similar manner. She has no right to question her husband’s faithfulness. So in Indian society, the one unpardonable crime for an unmarried girl is to have a sexual intercourse with any man willingly or unwillingly, though strangely enough, it is considered no crime at all for a man to have sexual relations with other girls before or after his marriage.

Nayantara Sahgal points out that man in fact often takes pride in his extra-marital involvements. For example in her novel, *Rich Like Us*, Ram Swarup has already two wives at home, Mona and Rose, but he continues to develop keen love affairs. He sees every relationship in life in terms of his own advantage and gratification. When he is involved with Marcella, he does not take care to hide it from Rose to save her from being hurt. There is no communication between Ram Swarup and Rose for four months but to her it seems she has been suffering for years. So love is merely fun or at the most passion for Ram Swarup and here Sahgal deals with the question of bigamy which entrails sufferings and sacrifices for the co-wives.

Thus in the fictional world of Nayantara Sahgal, young women are the helpless victims of the taboo-ridden, conventional society. Instead of asserting themselves against the tribulations, some of them easily accept the role traditionally offered to them, while some others opt for death as the only solution to the mundane man-made problems. In her novel, *A Situation in New Delhi*, Madhu after being raped by a group of university students in the Registrar's office, finds no sympathy and support from her parents or from the society and ultimately chooses to burn herself to death. When she is hospitalized after the rape, she is crying in agony but the nurse puts her hand on her mouth to stop her. Actually the nurse might be a wise and experienced woman who knows women are to suffer in silence and cries will make the matters only worse for the victim. On the other hand, Madhu's parents do not want that the neighbours should know about the incident of rape as this may lead to their social ostracization. Through this incident of rape, Nayantara Sahgal's purpose is not merely to depict the rumpus and disorder in the educational institutions, but to show that a woman in the patriarchal set up has no place to go to once she is stigmatized. This incident is just an example for the reality of women's position in the society.

The women in the novels of Nayantara Sahgal do not feel free to assert their individuality or defy the social institutions easily. The concept of woman as subservient to men and as man's property is deep-rooted in Indian tradition as well. According to a 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 and Sahgal strongly takes an exception to the attitudes which reduce woman to an object.

Conclusively, the present research paper of the novels of Nayantara Sahgal is based primarily on Feminism and beyond question, one can say that her novels are wool dyed with the spirit of Feminism. In the novels of Nayantara Sahgal, there is a sensitive depiction of the

way women suffer due to the sexist bias in the patriarchal society which gives a secondary position to women and always treats them as second-rate citizens. A more pitiable and annoying stage of woman's marginalization begins after her marriage. She is never recognized as an individual, an equal and a human being with her own needs and desires. She is usually seen as an object providing sexual pleasure to man, an asset as a decoration piece and a nursemaid to bring up the children and to shoulder all the responsibilities of the household. However it is important to mention here that though Nayantara Sahgal reveals the sufferings caused by the oppression of men, yet she is not against men. Her women look for happiness and self-fulfilment again in a world shared by both the sexes. Sahgal dreams a world which should be based on equality, sharing and harmony between the two sexes. Her vision is identical with that of the feminists in the eighties like Marilyn French, Dale Spender and Segal who also wish for a world based on equality of sexes where male and female, masculine and feminine are valued equally, and act as complementary to each other, a world built on sharing and understanding. Herein lies her most remarkable attainment that adds a new dimension and opens new vistas to Nayantara Sahgal's literary work and this gives her commendable and remarkable place in the realm of Indo-Anglican fiction

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