

Feminist Perspective in Nayantara Sahgal's Novels

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Abstract

Literature is the reflection of the society and the characters are the images of writers. Nayantara portrays the inalienable right of the characters in her novels. As a writer with feminist concerns, Nayantara Sahgal is a progeny of the tradition where in power itself is defined as goddess 'Saki' a female symbol. Her fictional world is busy by political leaders, business tycoons, foreign advisors, upper class people, journalists and highly qualified persons like ambassadors and ministers. A political theme is often combined to the theme of man-woman relationship, their marital problems, their temperamental incompatibility, the problems arising out of their submissiveness and finally the place of a woman in Indian society when she opts to dissolve a seventeen years old marriage. A divorced woman is stigmatised forever and she is curiously watched by others as if divorce were "a disease that left pock marks". In *Time to be Happy*, Nayantara's main concern is with self expression within marriage. She describes marriage as a "life-long damage" if the other partner is not sensitive enough to communicate. Marriage is the unwritten law of most societies and very few do not subscribe to it. Sahgal presents couples from three generations and details their antithetical relationships.

Nayantara Sahgal's leanings towards feminism even though mild, are quite marked in her novels *storm in Chandigarh* and *A Situation in New Delhi*. The fact comes and to light. When one studies the underserved ill-treatment, a large number of her women characters in these novels have to undergo in the society, and tries to know. Why they are driven to committing suicide or to seeking divorce, or to undergoing torments defenselessly when it becomes unavoidable. The woman character who is driven to committing suicide is Madhu in *A Situation in New Delhi*.

The society that Nayantara creates in *A Situation in New Delhi* is one which fails to protect women even on the university campus in the capital city of the country as here Madhu a student of Delhi University is raped in the Registrar's office. The boys who rape Madhu clearly consider Madhu only as an object of lust to be used at their disposal and have no regard for her feelings, will and self-respect. A society which produces such men and cannot punish them does not deserve to have women in it. One may raise an objection and argue that the whole society should not be disparaged for what three boys do, because if this society has produced these three boys it has also produced Usman Ali, the Vice-Chancellor who only expels the three guilty boys but also braves a physical assault and finally resigns as Vice Chancellor in order to organise people against the forces responsible for the rape of the girls. But the fact remains that his efforts bear little fruits and at last, the girl realises that even her brother would be thankful when he was relieved the responsibility of her and commits suicide in a state of helplessness by

immolating herself. So it is obvious that this society has failed to create conditions in which women feel themselves safe and out of the reach of immoral men.

The women characters who have opted to move out of the conjugal walls in order to escape ill-treatment are Saroj in *Storm in Chandigarh*, and Lydia and Nell in *A Situation in New Delhi*. Saroj's husband ill-treats his wife mainly for having lost her virginity before her marriage as is evident from their small piece of conversation between him and his wife. But Inder himself too had lost his virginity long before his marriage, as the narrator reports: "There had been no such nightmare to contend with until his marriage. He (Inder) had been precocious and successful in sex, robustly collecting experience where he found it. Saroj had plundered that robustness, made a tortured image of the body's surrender, and nailed him to the inquisitor's chair". Since he had a lot of erotic experience before his marriage, there is no ethical justification behind his expectation on his wife to have none. Saroj is beaten for this fault of hers, but Inder never punishes himself for his faults of identical nature. Lydia and Nell, the two ladies who become Michell's wives in *A Situation in New Delhi*, have to seek divorce because they find the husband's behavior to be intolerable. When Michael was Lydia's husband, "his drinking had blossomed into epic proportion" and his behavior towards her was far from satisfactory likewise Nell began to feel soon after her marriage with him. He was the only one using her, as it is evident from her remark: "you go on using (women) up like matches" since in each of these cases it is the husband who is at fault, it can be safely inferred that the novelist lays blame for the failure of each of these marriages at the husband's door and regards the wife as a victim of the male domination in society.

The woman character who has to undergo torments defenselessly because she finds her husband incorrigible in Nadira, the wife of Usman Ali. Nadira feels herself to have to be wronged by her husband, as she has come to know that he is in love with Devi, even though she herself has not shown even one single symptom of frailty as the narrator reports: "Nadira, looking on, wondered how he could, without going near sensuality about even this ordinary leave taking. It was the intangibles in her life with Usman that tormented her, nothing so explicable as adultery, though that was one of her demons too". Nadira is faithful to her husband inspired by the fact that Usman Ali married late as a result of which there is a wide gap between their ages. Nadira is hurt to find that her husband is availing himself of more freedom than a married man has a right to avail himself by making love to Devi. There is nothing unnatural or extra ordinary in a wife's desire for her husband to be exclusively as hers as there is nothing unnatural in a husband's desiring his wife to be exclusively his inevitably. But he hurts Nadira very deeply. Nadira was compelling Usman to cease to be in love with Devi is not at all unjustifiable. The social justification behind it is his wife has every reason to resent and call him ruthless. The way Nadira suffers torments defenselessly is, in Mrs. Sahgal's opinion typical of womankind, as her narrator in the novels reports: "(Nadira) turned around, her eyes with their look of more than childlike defenselessness, a creature of slaughter and sacrifice." And it provides an aperture for the reader to peep into Mrs. Sahgal's mind and read that for her, womenfolk just as Nadira has been at the hands of Usman Ali.

Secondly, Mrs. Sahgal creates a number of feminists in her novels and makes them give women's claims to be regarded as individuals rather than as mere dependents. Such

characters includes men like Vishal Dubey in *Storm in Chandigarh* and Rishad in *A Situation in New Delhi*, and women characters like Tazi and Reba in *A Situation in New Delhi*. Vishal Dubey would like women not to remain subdued and to express themselves. Vishal resins the fact that a woman is not regarded as an individual as he reflects, “Women were not a subject for discussion. They were wives, daughters, and mothers. They belonged to their men by contract or by blood. Their sphere was sexual and their job procreation. They were dependents, not individuals”. Dubey holds that a woman is punished for the faults, but is considered tolerable if a man commits them: “A woman was not entitled to a past, not entitled to human hunger, human passion, or even human error. In the fires and desolations of living she ranked as not quite human”.

These are the arguments of a feminist voicing her protest against the dominance of male human beings in the society. Rishad, the other feminist, would like a girl to marry a boy of her choice, and regards an arranged rape. When Rishad comes to know that Pinky is going to be given in marriage to a boy whom she has never met, he refuses even to attend the marriage and expresses his resentment. If he had his way, he would have freed Pinky from the need of her seeking her mother’s permission or, for that matter, anybody’s permission to go out. His argument that a girl be allowed to marry a boy of her choice is quite appealing. Tazi and Reba voice women’s resentment at being subjected to the humiliation of undergoing close supervision. They would like to get married early so that they escape prying supervision. The act becomes evident when going through the narrator’s report: Tazi and Reba kept repeating soon (Pinky) be living her own life away from prying supervision...

However, these assertions should not be taken to mean that Nayantara Sahgal is a champion of women’s complete liberation and likes women to have nothing to be done with men. If her women characters, who are free from the dominance of men, had exercised adequate restraints over themselves and had been shown leading spotless lives. She could have been regarded as a champion of women’s complete liberation. But the fact remains that her women characters, which are free from the dominance of men do not exercise adequate self-restraint and do not lead blameless lives. We can take the case of Davi, for instance. Even though she is free from the dominance of a husband as she is a widow; she is in love with two men, named Usman Ali and Michael. Another reason for why Nayantara Sahgal cannot be regarded as a champion of women’s liberation is that she admits the fact that a woman needs a husband biologically.

References

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