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CONCEPT OF NEW INDIAN WOMEN IN NAYANTARA SAHGAL'S NOVELS

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ABSTRACT

Nayantara Sahgal was born on May10, 1927 to Ranjit Sitaram pandit and Vijayalakshmi Pandit as the second of their three daughters. She has published eight novels, two autobiographies and a political study of Indira Gandhi's years in power along with a considerable number of journalistic writings mostly on current political events and the position of women, giving a clarion call to women to emerge as a 'new women' journeying towards freedom. This article focuses on the concept of New Indian Women in her novels. The concept of 'New Women' with a "new morality" based on reason and justice is of recent origin, struggling to grow into any reasonable form. This article gives a comprehensive assessment of the highlights of the problems, especially of women.

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INTRODUCTION

Nayantara Sahgal is one of the distinguished Indo English writers who write in the stream & national consciousness. She is a prolific writer and her literary canon consists of nine novels, two autobiographies and some non-fictional works. In fact, Nayantara Sahgal has introduced a considerable number of autobiographical elements in her novels. For a question, she asserts that 'all art is autobiographical' (Women's Space The Mosaic World Of Margaret Drabble And Nayantara Sahgal, 27).Her work ranges from factual and emotional autobiography to fictionalized autobiography.

Nayantara believes that it is not a serious moral offence in a woman to break away from the 'sacred' marriage bond, if she finds the shackles too oppressive to the growth of her inner self. She finds that a women's duty to be sincere to her inner self is far greater and urgent than to be for family and society. Nayantara portrays the inalienable right of freedom in women in many of the characters in her novels, such as Simrit, Saroj and Rashmi. This article focuses on the concept of New Indian Woman in India through the ages so that it might throw light on the approach and treatment of those problems by Nayantara Sahgal.

Through centuries the concept of ideal womanhood has been based on mythical personages like Sita, Nalayani. A woman was expected to be under the care of a male throughout her life. One section that has made a great impact is that which disallows any freedom for women, is as follows:

Pitaarakshatikaumaree, bhartharakshatiyauvanee
Putroorakshativedhakee, natri

Swathantharyamarhati (ix, 3) (Women and her family, 2)

(‘The father protects the woman during childhood, the husband during her youth and the son during her old age. A woman does not deserve freedom’).

A woman is therefore inculcated with the ideals of martyrdom, of pride in patience, of the need to accept a lower status through the mythical models of Sita, Savithri, Gandhari etc.

The dialogue between Ram and Rose in the novel ‘The Rich Like Us’ is introduced to bring to light the condition of women generally prevailing in Society. Another evil perpetrated in the society is the male prerogative over female issues. Women are considered as commodities, greater the number, greater the convenience. Men do not bother about the emotional Constraints, which they impose upon women. Women have to put up with such inconveniences on economic considerations. When Ram describes Draupdi was gambled away by her five husbands, Rose is literally shocked.

Sahgal approaches the problem of women with responsibility, maturity and understanding. she is aware of the fact that women’s problems are not confined to women only. society consists of men and woman and the happiness of one or the other depends upon a co-operative endeavour. Women cannot be antagonistic towards men as they cannot be so without peril. The responsibility of bringing about a happy society rests equally on men and women in the society. Sahgal understands the need for a spirit of co-operation on the part of men. It is the duty of the educated, responsible men in society to help in the emancipation of women. Sahgal brings out this point clearly when she makes her heroines in the novels dependent on the responsible men in society Simrit is helped and guided by Raj in every way. It is Raj who tries to break the spirit of passivity in Simrit and make her take some positive action. Under his control, paradoxically she says that she feels completely free.

It is Dubey who directs and encourages Saroj to make her think freely, to break away from the shackles, especially if they prove meaningless or unjustifiable. Rashmi is directed by Kalidas. It seems that Sahgal makes her heroines deliberately passive or dependent so that responsible men should come forward to help them find their way in the mire. It is the society’s responsibility, Sahgal believes, to take steps to improve the quality of life for women, to make them full-fledged human beings, to realize their independent ‘personhood’.

Society consists of men and women. She cautions woman not to fritter away their hard on freedom in fighting for equality in dress or behaviour. They should achieve something solid to prove their merit. A self-fulfilled woman will be an asset to the family. She also finds fault with the society, which observes a double standard with regard to chastity or morality. While society imposes strong sanctions against even minor indiscretions on the part of women, it shows considerable leniency towards such aberrations in men. She also castigates the undue importance given to chastity. The concept of chastity, according to Sahgal, is much more related to mind than to body. Most of the times the punishment falls heavy on the aggrieved party that is woman. For her, Sex is not an act of body or for the movement but it pervades mind and spirit and all activities of husband and wife. It is an act of culmination of love, understanding and sympathy. But it does not mean the she is for promiscuity. She condemns the frivolity and excesses in sex in women as exemplified in her novels.

This article was undertaken a critical study of the novels of Nayantara Sahgal in an endeavour to arrive at some valid conclusions regarding her attitude towards women’s problems and how she envisages “the concept of new women in India”.

In Sahgal’s *Storm in Chandigarh* Inder, the husband, who himself is hankering after another woman Mara, constantly rebukes and harasses his wife Saroj because of her past sexual indulgence with her college mate once; Ram in *Rich Like Us* has already two wives at home, but he continues to develop ardent love affairs with Marcela. Sahgal feels, “if chastity is so important and so well worth preserving. It would be easier to safeguard it by keeping men seclusion, not women”. (*Chandigarh*191)

Marriage is the deepest as well as the problematic of all human relations. Religion considers marriage as holy union of two souls. But the same religion imposes rigid code of conduct for women. Wounded butterflies who long to survive emerge out of chrysalis and find an outlet in doing social service as in the case of Maya in *A Time to be morning*; Rashmi terminations her marriage and stands alone in *This Time of Morning*:

Simrit, a freelancer, marries Raj starts a new life in the day in shadow: Saroj an innocent and caring mother daringly comes and find solace in Vishal in Storm in Chandigarh; and Devi, a woman cabinet minister, survives alone in politics in A situation in new Delhi.

There are female character who, in the name of freedom, cross the boundaries of family and marriage. In Sahgal's A Time to be Happy. Lalitha Chatterjee, wife of Ronu Chatterjee a very important person, drinks and has an affair with another man: Uma Mitra, the young wife of ArjunMitra flirts, drinks, smokes and ruins herself: and Leela, a student, conceives out of wedlock commits suicide when she learns of it in This Time of Morning, Gauri, freely has sex with Vishal in the absence of her husband Nikhil: Leela, the faithless wife of Vishal dies, when her pregnancy is and medically terminated: and Mara has personal affair with Inder without the knowledge of Jit in Storm in Chandigarh. This violation of morality in their life does not allow them to become new women. Sahgal seems to have a clear message to convey, when women resort to immorality their life becomes either meaningless or end up in an unnatural death. Sahgal's marital morality as revealed in her works is based on honesty, mutual trust, considerations, understanding and freedom, she attacks selfishness, pretence, which result subsequently in martial breakdown.

Instinctively, her major women characters stay acquiescent, student, silent and suffering, but when faced with injustice Maya, Saroj, Rashmi or Simrit, they show sight of awaking, reject the stereotype and speak out the truth. Earlier they have been only human as submissive and conforming persons, but later on they are independent and whole beings.

Men like Inder in Storm in Chandigarh, Som in the Day in Shadow are the embodiment of chauvinism. They have the code of conduct as far as they are concerned and another where women are concerned. As a result Saroj and Simrit suffer humiliation and agony. But they manage to survive once they come out of their marriages, from 'the subdued sex, creatures not yet emerged from the chrysalis'. (Chandigarh 189) they were 'filled with the sheer rightness of beings alive and healthy'. (shadow 236)

Conclusion

The clear message Sahgal gives is men and women are equals and peaceful survival depends on mutual respect and understanding, women should have the moral courage to claim the rights and 'men.. were born to lead and educate sometimes to triumph'. (Shadow 236).

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