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Nayantara Sahgal: A New Perspective to Women's Writing in India

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Abstract

Women in India have always been treated with extremity. They are either worshipped as 'Devi' or Goddess, or are portrayed as '*Abla nari*' or meek creature, who needs the protection, care, guidance and support of men to survive in this world. They do not have a voice of their own, and are supposed to follow unconditionally, the diktats of their male counterparts without questioning or contradicting them. Nayantara Sahgal presents a new woman; a woman of the post independent India, who is educated, ambitious, confident and willing to challenge the old and filthy traditions and to rewrite history in her own way. The present paper attempts to analyze the treatment of women, marital relationship and political history of India in the novels of Nayantara Sahgal.

Key Words: New perspective, marital relationship, tradition, modernity, political history.

Nayantara Sahgal is an eminent and celebrated Indian writer in English. Her fiction concerns with the plight of woman and the crises prompted by political change. Novels bring out Nayantara Sahgal as a writer with feminist concerns seeking independent existence of women in her own unique style. She sees women as victims of conventional Indian society, engaged in their quest for identity. This new found quest for identity of women in the post colonial India is one of the major themes of her fiction. Commenting on Nayantara Sahgal's writing, John Howley (1996) remarks:

In the writings of Nayantara Sahgal, identity of post-colonial women seems to be fluid, something that displaces itself in various places on a constantly evolving continuum. Moreover, it is both subject to and created by the ideological history that surrounds it by ideology; I mean an organized system of beliefs that

operates in an Individual, a society or a text, through, conscious or unconscious representation or figuration. (161)

The traditional Indian society has always treated women as second grade citizens, whose only job is to get married and give birth to the next generation. Women have no choice or say in their marriage, they are supposed to live their whole life with the man, who is chosen by her parents or relatives. She is not supposed to question the groom. She is expected to continue with her marital relationship, till the last breath of her life, no matter what comes. Marriage, for most of Indian women, is an eternal journey of passive sufferings. In this connection, Uma Narayan (1997) very aptly remarks:

I would thus argue my sense that marriage as an oppressive institution for many women is something that predates my explicit acquisition of a feminist politics, and something I

initially learned not from books but from Indian women in general, and my female relatives in particular. After all, many women like, my mother, whose 'cultural authenticity' and 'Indianness' are not at issue, commonly acknowledge the mistreatments women are subjected to within their marriage. (9)

Nayantara Sahgal herself acknowledges this 'mistreatment of women... within their marriage' in her own novel, *This Time of Morning*. She says, "...Women stayed married, had since time immemorial stayed married, under every conceivable circumstance, to brutal insensitive husbands, to lunatics and lepers." (146)

In Indian society, woman who continues her marriage, in spite of all odds that she has to encounter, is regarded as virtuous woman and is held in high esteem, but Nayantara Sahgal presents a new kind of virtuous woman; who is not there to suffer perennially but is ready to take on the world in her own way. In an interview, Nayantara Sahgal defines her virtuous woman in no ambiguous terms, she states:

Right from the beginning my women have been a sort of new definition of the virtuous women. The virtuous woman according to tradition is ideally a kind of 'Sati', i.e. one whose life ends in self immolation. She is there to suffer, to stay put, and to endure all the problems that come her way. My women, right from the start of my novels, have walked out.

Most of the woman protagonist in Nayantara Sahgal's novels are victims of Patriarchal oppression, but unlike the

common woman, who would yield easily in such situations, the heroines of Sahgal are courageous, defiant, determined to fight all odds and have the strength to succeed. One such fine example is Sonali in Sahgal's *Rich like Us*. She is highly educated, is an officer of prestigious Indian Civil Services; with her own ideals in life, on which she is not willing to compromise, even though she has to pay dearly for this attitude in a male dominated society, yet she fights it all, which is very typical of modern Indian woman in post-independent era.

Every writer is the product of society, in which he or she is born and most of his/her works, if not all, are representative of the socio, cultural and political environment of his time. The story of Nayantara Sahgal's novels is the story of growth and development of modern India; of changing cultural dynamics and political landscape and people's response to such upheavals.

Born as second daughter of Vijay Lakshmi Pandit and niece of the first premier of independent India enabled Nayantara Sahgal to develop a strong sense about the political problems of India, which is also reflected in her novels. She presents the historical incidents with great acumen and precision and without directly referring to it, so that they may not seem merely as historical facts. T.N Dhar very clearly brings out this special feature of Sahgal's writings, in his book. He opines:

First, she writes about the past without invoking it directly that is, avoiding as far as possible, direct reference to cultural events, happenings and people, but in a manner that they become

recognizable. Secondly, instead of dealing with long stretches of time, she concentrates on short periods or specific tendencies or issues of crucial import, which have their basis in actuality. (P 122)

This special feature of Sahgal may best be noted in *Prison and Chocolate*, where she puts all her experience and understanding of political history and problems, without comprising on the basic principles of writing fiction. Lets us take an example from *Prison and Chocolate* to affirm this point.

Mamu has already gone. Papu is going in a day or two and my turn will come next week. You and Lekha and Tara will remain out, but you will be satyagrahis just the same as we and you will do your bit by keeping the flag flying over Anad

Bhawan. This is a big job and you will be helping in the good fight just much as we are...we want smiles and grit to win through in this fight which will mean freedom for us all, and for this great big, beautiful India of our think of it, darling, you and I and papu and mamu are helping to make her free. Isn't it something to be proud of and very happy about?

Nayantara Sahgal is the novelist, who championed in the emancipation of women and brought a new perspective to writing about women in modern India. She acted as an avant-grade for rights of women and the need to understand woman in a new scenario, where they are not merely a commodity to be used and thrown away but human beings, made of flesh and blood, having their own independent existence.

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