

# GENDER ESSENTIALISM V/S SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONISM IN THE INDIAN CONTEXT AS PRESENTED IN SAHGAL'S *'A SITUATION IN NEW DELHI'*

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## Abstract-

Gender, sex, and sexuality, these words always remained a question of complexity, to which human civilization made a considerable effort to demystify. The concept of woman's exploitation on the basis of their sex is not something new. In this patriarchal world of ours, a woman is always brought down to the level of mere sex slave and subordinate to a man. The concept of gender- role, whether in India or in Abroad, has become that much absorbed in our veins that we started taking it as a part and parcel in our life. But the concept of 'Social Constructionism' goes against the idea of 'Gender Essentialism', which tries to examine behavioural patterns of a human being in reference to the verifying system of civilization. This present paper of mine attempts to discover this conflict of notion in human behaviour, especially in the Indian context as presented by Nayantara Sahgal in her novel 'A Situation in New Delhi', which presents a picture gallery of a number of female characters confirming to one concept or to another, in order to inspect how much the radical fervour of essentialism has changed with the passage of time, giving place to the notion of gender performativity.

## Key Words-

Gender, Sex, Sexuality, Patriarchal, Social Constructionism, Gender Essentialism, Gender Performativity.

The existence of gender bias, differentiation between the male and female sex and identity crisis on the basis of anatomy is something that the most of the Indian women face existing in society. Indian society ascribes certain roles to female sex in accordance to their birth as being an obedient daughter doing household works, protecting their virginity, getting married to a man selected by their parents, to be a responsible wife and mother, and attaining perfection in this way (a moment that a woman achieves after giving birth to a child as it was declared even by 'Sylvia Plath' in her poem 'Edge'.)

In Indian patriarchal society, a girl child faces all kinds of oppression against their individuality and struggles for acceptance as equal beings since their birth. Woman who has created this world by giving birth to a new life, is forced to surrender to a secondary role right from her childhood.

But the whole discussion about female identity and gender role gives birth to a question- whether femininity is constructed culturally or biologically. The ancient Hindu philosopher 'Manu', for instance in 'Manusmriti' stresses on dependence of woman on man as an essential principle as he says, "*In childhood must a female be dependent on her father; in youth, on her husband; her lord being dead, on her sons; if she has no sons, on the near kinsmen of her husband; if she be left no kinsmen, on those of her father, a woman must never seek independence*" (68). In this sense, he flourished the idea that a woman is a woman biologically not culturally. This dependence on man, inferior status in marriage, lost identity and discrimination is gifted to a woman by mere attainment of vagina.

But this concept was challenged by such feminists as 'Simone of Beauvoir', who paved a path for the concept of gender performativity that conflicted with the notion of gender essentialism as she said-

***"One is not born, but rather becomes a woman. No biological, psychological or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society, it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature, intermediate between male and eunuch, which is described as Feminine."*** (The Second Sex, pn. 445)

So if we examine closely the situation of modern society, we always find women trapped in a situation which pushes her into the domestic household space and women in our country better know such situation having seen it all closely. But the world has undergone changes, so our country too. This change in a moving away from essentialism to believing in personality as a social construct and this all became possible with a change in attitude of a modern Indian woman from accepting their submissive role

to standing against sexual discrimination and marginalization prescribed as appropriate for their sex by the narrow-mindedness of patriarchal society. Now women don't allow themselves to be crushed by bondage of male domination as an essential by Indian social structure. Women needed a weapon to arouse feelings in them to challenge gender bias on the basis of having particular sex organs and to make themselves believe in their equal status and literature served as this weapon. For this manifestation I have selected 'A Situation in New Delhi' of 'Nayantara Sahgal' that focuses on this change. This work makes us realize the value of freedom from forced harassment in a man's world where identity is a royalty as far as women are concerned by portraying female characters like Devi and Skinny Jaipal, who prove that our upbringing and social environment decide our way of living and thinking. These women characters are fine example to prove that we'll be what our society will allow us to be. On another hand, we have characters like Madhu and Pinky, who surrender in front of agonies and traumas in form of gender-roles, prescribed by social structure as an essential.

'A Situation in New Delhi' is a novel about a vision of future that presents before us a dream of a harmonized human world, in which people don't believe and stress on discrimination in social, physical, educational and political field on the basis of birth. Sahgal always quoted that a writer should have, "A mission .....to create a vision of the future, he has to have a dream of his own and to suggest possibilities from it ..... it's the artist's job and the writer's job particularly in any society to show the way". (Of Divorce, pn.6), and that's what she has tried to do and has done in her novels. She has excelled in presenting, "gender oppression and their subtle exposure of marginalized and repressed position of woman in a male-dominated society" (Neena Arora, pn.5) as well as those women who break this stereotype image by selecting those roles that don't fit into this universal patriarchal perspective of inferior status of women. This particular novel deals with a number of women characters as Devi- the education minister, Nadira – a woman devoted to her husband, Suvarnapriya Jaipal- a rebellious girl and a great dancer, Madhu – a girl raped in university campus, women like Pinky and Veena Puri who have joyfully accepted role of traditional Indian women and women like Lydia and Nell, who are minor characters but successfully presented a movement of gradual change in the essentialized presentation of gender bias. This novel concludes with giving us a fine demonstration of airy revolutionary thoughts, which remarkably affected the restricting authorities which imposed their orthodox notions on the female sex, resulted in destroying their personalities and identities beneath it.

So here we have a couple of women belonging to both domains. The first group consists of women like Veena, Pinky, Nadira, Madhu, Tazi and Reba that represents the pathetic plight of those Indian women who easily became a victim of the brutal male-dominated conventional society, instead of fighting against the traditional patriarchal set-up. They easily accept the role offered to them, while another group that consists of women like Devi, Suvarnapriya Jaipal (Skinny Jaipal), represents those Indian women who "refuse to fit into the mould of perfect lady..... instead strive to carve a niche, a respectable and equal place for themselves within the social order". (The Fictional Milieu, pn.23)

Veena puri, a friend of Devi, is a minor character of this work who believes in living a life exactly as our mothers and grandmothers had lived, leaving behind this mad chase of being modern. That's what she expects from her daughter Pinky too. When Devi asked her how much she has informed her daughter about sex before marriage, she replied – "There you go being modern. What do you want her to know? Her in-laws are very conservative. They don't want one of these smart newfangled girls..... You and I did all right. It's rubbish this modern business about knowing everything before you marry. (43)". Pinky is very much like her mother who is concerned about marriage, her look, figure and trousseau than with making her identity. When a marriage proposal came for her, her parents (Vijay and Veena) arranged a meeting and she gave her consent that represents her surrender to the patriarchal bondage to which a girl is not allowed to choose for herself.

Pinky's friends Tazi and Reba belong to the same creed who believe marital cord to be a bliss, a license to live one's "Own life, away from prying supervision". (169) They consider pinky lucky to "be elevated to wife status and do as she pleased". (169), without knowing much about the reality of marriage in Indian society that comes with the baggage of complex problems such as domination, adjustments etc. Such girls are always preferred as wives, as they never question or go against the perception of their partner, by submitting to the patriarchal notion according to which women are born to be exploited and dominated by men-first by their father, then by her husband and after the death of her husband by her son.

But if a woman tries to go in against this patriarchal notion, we see her fate like that of Madhu, whose existence and individuality is crushed at the hands of male-centered society as well as at the hand of her own family. She was raped in registrar's office and oppressed even by her own family who instead of supporting her at this crucial moment, are in search of a groom who will help them in getting rid of this shame. She is not allowed to shed tears, to live her life again and not even to raise her voice to get justice against her prosecutors. Her case really is a very fine example of women's status in our society who are forced to conform to the social ways what they do, because they know well about the traditional hypocrisies of society that crushes their existence when they protest against it.

Next important character belonging to this group is Nadira, vice Chancellor Usman Ali's wife, who has accepted her fate as a woman by believing that she has certain roles to perform, being born as a woman, like that of a conventional wife who is just a shadow of her husband. When Usman married Nadira, she charmed "his friends with her romantic looks, studied manners and her sight but promising poetic talent. But soon she had gone into a kind of mourning, Reflection on him". (34) She was so much obsessed and devoted to her gender roles that she "refused to let anything else matter to her". (34) She never attempted to become a companion to her husband but just a shadow, as the matter of championship comes with the right to equality that she never expected in her marital life being born as a female. This served as the final irony in the marital cord of Nadira and Usman as he

wanted a body with a soul, the privilege that he enjoyed while being with Devi, on another hand Nadira "remained so determinedly a body".(35)

These are those Indian women who always remained within the ambit of their traditional Indian role of a daughter, wife, mother etc, fulfilling these responsibilities without giving any thought to their own identity and if they ever tried to come out of their repressed gender role, their very existence and individuality is demolished, making them realize their inferior status. The idea of male superiority in accordance to have taken birth as a male with penis(so called symbol of male superiority) is infested in mind of Indian people to such a great extent that revolting against it seems to a sin to these women and they easily adopt the role of a submissive character, who has no identity of her own.

But the same novel presents in front of us characters like Devi and Skinny Jaipal too, who are specimen of liberated modern Indian woman, struggling to create their own independent worth, which really deserves our consideration. Gender essentialism is something that they really don't care something about. They abominate this kind of patriarchal set-up which enslaves women and look down upon it as an instrument of perpetuating male domination. Through these characters Sahgal focuses on giving us evidence about constructionism which beliefs in the acquirement of habits and roles because of a person's interaction in a social environment.

Devi, the education minister, mother of Rishad, sister to Shivraj, wife of Ishwar and friend to Michael Calvert and Usman Ali, plays several different traditional roles beautifully, but still shows in her sign of awakening, breaking the mould of stereotypical Indian women. After death of her husband, she had an affair with Michael Calvert and sex came naturally to her with him, she never cared about her widowed status and lived her life on her own terms. When she was proposed by Michael to marriage, she refused him to be with her brother. She presents herself before us as a woman "who has not only an imposing personality but also an unyielding authority". (The Fictional Millie, P.n.35)

Her relation to Usman Ali is of the soul as well of a body that he failed to make with his wife. Being an educated woman, she never gave any attention to unyielding barriers of class, caste, colour, creed, and struggled to eradicate gender discrimination. As a woman, Sahgal has presented her as the embodiment of 'New Woman' who "would not end her abundant emotional life at Ishwar's pyre. She should live and more". (30)

And here comes the most favourite character of mine-Suvarnapriya Jaipal or we can call her Skinny, a name given by Rishad, prototype of Sahgal's new woman, who doesn't come under the influence of a man like another woman, but on the other hand, she affects a male with her revolutionary thoughts. A girl who looks very much like a skeleton, surprises Rishad with her grace and unyielding will to bring a change in society. A girl who believes that a real change can occur only when an act of necessity is done to yourself first not to someone else. That's why she ripped off clothes of her own dead mother, as she "knew straight away it was for a purpose. It was a rite".(73) She surprisingly came like a gust of fresh air in rebellious isolated life of Rishad that hopefully opposed the stereotypical image of dependent status of a woman on man in aspects of social, political and economic pressures. so with help of this study, we come to the conclusion that social and economic system of society abandons women's acceptance as independent individuals and fails even to recognize them as human beings as 'Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley' in her introduction to 'A Vindication' says-

***"Dismissing ,then ,those pretty Feminine phrases ,which the men condescendingly use to soften our slavish dependence, and despising that weak elegance of mind, exquisite sensibility, and sweet docility of manners, supposed to be the sexual characteristics of the weaker vessel, I wish to show that elegance is inferior to virtue, that the first object of laudable ambition is to obtain a character as a human being, regardless of the distinction of sex, and that secondary views should be brought to this simple touchstone ".(p.n. 82)***

We know it well that our Indian society has changed a lot since the Vedic period and it's still changing. In Vedic period, she enjoyed the prestigious position and allowed to be educated. With the arrival of Muslims dependence of women on their male relatives or husbands became the prominent feature of the Hindu society. In British rule, a number of changes were made and progress was achieved in the elimination of inequalities between men and women in education, their social rights etc. When India got independence, Indian constitution was enacted and it gave equal rights and opportunities to both the sex, helping women to come out of their essentialized gender role.

But despite such a fascinating picture of a liberated woman, a question always haunts my mind. Have we got freedom in reality from gender essentialism or not? What is our true status? So the answer is that "Yes" we have changed a lot as women and started strengthening ourselves more and more to change the organizational differences between sexes, but still a lot more has to be done.

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