

# Feminist Assertion in the Novels of Nayantara Sahagal

Dr.Sridhar Sharma

Department of English

Government College, Hod ,Sikar

## Abstract

The Indian feminist writers had been vividly presenting and are still highlighting this traditional created imbalance. They are doing great job by depicting the conflict of the weaker as has been called from traditions, against the superior, keeping well in mind the cultural and social structure of India. The depiction of modern Indian women in the works of these feminists does not deflect Indian women from her traditional roles and chores but facilitates her easy and efficient performance and thereby vindicates her Indian identity.

As discussed earlier, the exigencies of socio-political and cultural structure of a country gives an impetus and momentum to the conscious writers of the age. Indian English novelists were inspired by the freedom movement and Gandhi's political ideology. The Indian novelists took upon themselves the responsibility of giving artistic articulation of the problems that beset the common people and their small joys and immense sorrows, the crusade against the tyranny of poverty, illiteracy, suffering, disease, superstition, caste and sex. Resulting in a number of novels the protagonist is a farmer, a labourer, a factory worker, a patient or a virtuous women pitted against a zamindar, a landlord, a factory owner, or a ruthless, callous hardhearted man. It may be aptly remarked that Indian English novelists have fairly succeeded in their efforts to portray creatively in a realistic manner the problems of the age. They not only present the various problems: social, cultural, political, and economics of the contemporary society but also offer solutions in terms of fictional art.

**Keywords:** Identity, Human rights, Conjugal Bonds, Captivity, Subjugation, Emancipation.

## Introduction

After Independence the subject of novels took a turn due to the developments of intercultural relations between countries and fast developing electronic media and the awareness of human rights and thrust on women education. The status and predicament of women in Indian society set another motivating force for the Indian novelists with a social purpose. Despite the fact that woman can contribute to social regeneration, family welfare she continues to be a victim of social prejudices and male chauvinism. However, Gandhi's call to the Indian women to participate activity in the freedom movement made them conscious of the much-needed liberation and equality of opportunity in personal, social and political life. Recognizing the potential of women to join their counterparts in their struggle against ignorance, superstition and backwardness, Indian English novelists in general, and women novelists in particular began to think women as legitimate, current and needful subjects for their purposeful social novels. Their Endeavour was to be relevant to their culture by presenting characters and situations rooted in Indian ethos.

It may be relevant to dwell here on the real motivate force behind the contemporary novelists' writing with a social purpose and the urgent need: It is also rewarding to discuss the reasons which led Indian women

into this predicament, where they need to struggle against their superiors for identity and status which once they so graciously enjoyed.

A retrospective look into Indian History will enable us to understand that women used to enjoy self-respect, dignity and honour in ancient days and a trace of women's status can still be marked in the recitation of the hymns and mantras at the time of all wedding ceremony and husbands 'vows made to allow all the privileges of a respectable partner to their wives. Till the advent of Muslim rulers Indian woman enjoyed and availed herself of privileges but later it became the need of the time and compulsion on the part of the husband to safeguard the honour of his partner from the despotic ruling class. She was kept veiled and hidden under roof till Independence. Hundreds of years of seclusion made her morale infirm.

Gandhian philosophy and Indians struggle for freedom, and growing fast globalization and steadily growing consciousness among women are the main motivating forces behind the novelists and writers of the present age. A writer, who steps ahead of time in capturing the igniting spark and airs it in his work to set it in flames, always wins general approbation.

She has been making efforts to pull out Indian woman from the quagmire of her lost identity with the same means, but with diversified idiosyncrasies and variegated aspects. The emergence of women novelists in Indian English literature took place as early as the last quarter of the nineteenth century. But, it was the post-Independence period, which had brought to the forefront a number of noted women novelists who have enriched Indian English fiction by creative release of feminine sensibility and who inspired Indian women to regain their lost battle of equity, comradeship and self-identity. Women have been the central figure of many a literary works in this era. Writers apart from these three renowned novelists under study are Kamala Markandaya, Ruth Praver Jhabvala, Kamla Das, Eunice d'Souza, Shobha De, Arundhati Roy, Gita Hariharan, Imtiaz Dharker.

The Problems of women, which were, till now considered to be centrifugal i.e. to break the chains of bondage and captivity and to be free; are now reversed to centripetal i.e. to regain her self-identity. Through the eyes of these women writers, one visualizes a different world till now not projected in literature. Women, who were till then treated as second class citizens are assigned their due place in the novels of these novelists. The novels of these novelists present a picture of the impact of education on women, her new status in the society and her assertion of individuality. The works of these three novelists discussed here can be well compared to Canadian novelists like Margaret Atwood, Margaret Lawrence and Arithavan Herk. All these writers write of life as viewed by women and contemporary life affecting women.

The present study sets out to highlight and incorporate the feminist issues raised by Nayantara Sahgal in her novels. This study also attempts to place in a critical perspective the feminist assertion in the novels. While attempting to determine the shift in general literary sensibility in the novels the study directs attention on women's awakening consciousness and her confrontation against a male dominated, tradition-oriented society. Though the methods of interpretation vary in their complexity and also in accordance with the problematic of individual novelist, the Indian woman being at the center emerges as a human being, essentially Indian in sensibility and likely to remain so in the near future.

## Analysis

Nayantara Sahgal, Born on May 10, 1927 in Allahabad to Vijay Lakshmi and Rajit Sitaram Pandit is the second of their three daughters and the child of rich heritage. Her parents and a number of other relatives, including her maternal Uncle Jawahar Lal Nehru, were actively engaged in the country's freedom struggle. Her

ideology from the onset of teenage started taking an unrestrained political shape and she emerged as a political fiction writer and journalist.

Nayantara Sahgal deals with feminine problems in her novels, because she has personally undergone through such bitter experiences in her life. One's experiences certainly are reflected in one's works, and these experiences may be asset or drawback or both simultaneously. Jasbir Jain has been rightly observed that:

There is always a connection between a writer's life and his literary work; in the case of Nayantara Saha gal this connection happens to be far more intimate and deep than it ordinarily is, for her work ranges from factual and emotional autobiography to fictionalized autobiography. A study of the early influences on her life is of particular relevance in her case for the have helped mould her political and social attitudes....( Nayantara Sahgal, 1)

For a thorough understanding of her politics-social and mental make-up a brief biographical account may prove to be of much relevance. Backed by a rich family background and a highly eventful life Nayantara turned to journalism and creative writing. Since then continuously Nayantara Sahgal has been active on the scene both as a creative writer and political columnist. She has opened new dimensions and perspectives in novel writing by adopting politico-Social genre. She has been arousing awareness in readers with a purpose, that no problem can be solved without power. Merely knowing a problem is not sufficient. A solution to the problem needs to be found out. As such, political awareness coupled with political will is absolutely essential. Novel has always been a vehicle of social purpose since its emergence in the Eighteenth Century. A novelist has to be socially conscious before he hopes to deliver the goods to Nayantara Sahgal's remarks in this context are noteworthy:

To be relevant to his culture a writer's imagination....has to be able to create the men and women and situations of the Indian environment and the Indian reality. If a writer can do this, make people feel with him, Stimulate thinking, and inspire action because of what he writes, then he is fulfilling his function.(The Indian Writer and the English Language,P:v.5)

Her novels, thus, present the problem situations of Indian polity and provide solutions to political confrontation, Social evils, Individual conflicts, man-woman relationship thus educating the readers politically, socially and psychologically. She recommends a system of freedom and liberalism with a strong urge for humanistic concern which alone makes social change meaningful.

Her novels revolve round two themes: one that India is changing with the times and Indian people must also adjust their thinking to these changes; two that lack of communication between individuals, especially between man and wife, cause unhappiness and prevents human fulfillment. These two themes are not simply stated but are also woven into subtle and intricate patterns of multi colored tapestry. In order to focus on her

world of fiction a brief discussion of her major novels may not be out of the way and as such an analysis of these novels is attempted here.

A Time To Be Happy first published is 1958 in England and in 1963 in India, it is Nayantara's first novel. In this novel, the hero Sanad begins by wanting to resign from the British firm of Selkirk and Lowe, and ends by forging his links stronger with the firm. The narrator says, "This is really Sanad's story"; and so indeed it is. The son of a Zamindar, Sanad joins Selkirk and Lowe at their office in Saharanpur, learns to drink and to make love, laves in the waters of sophistication, marries the worthy Kusum and when freedom comes at last, he has the best of both worlds. Sanad has the talent to be happy and nothing can stop him from getting on. But Nayantara's main concern is self-expression with in conjugal ties of Sanad-Kusum, HariLal- Prabha, Ammaji-Govind Nayantara's father and Ronu- Lalita. The other characters of the novel are Marion Finch, Sohan Bhai, McIvor, Raghuvir Sahdev, Girish, Harish Lakshmi, Bihari, Maya and Devika.

This time of Morning is another more matured novel. Nayantara Sahgal liberally draws upon her knowledge, of what happens in the corridors of power, or in the drawing rooms of politically very important people, or in the lobbies in Parliament. As one reads the novel, and recapitulates the political events in India, in the last years of Nehru's Prime Minister ship, one cannot resist the temptation of some of the characters in the novel with historical figures. But the novel deserves to be read as a piece of fiction rather than as a slice of history. Rakesh, a junior official in the External Affairs Ministry, returns after a term abroad to Delhi and even at Palam he feels the pace of change in the country. He is soon caught up in the whirl of politics, social life, careerism and intrigue. Personal and political ambitions criss-cross, and there are unpredictable affiliations and separations. The novel is peopled with upper class intellectuals, sophisticated officials, scheming politicians, ambitious civil servants and their pretty but disgruntled wives, foreign advisers with an intent eye on beautiful women and many others. The marital relationship portrayed in novel are significant for discordant ties, alienated wives, lack of communication, urge for identity, and fulfillment of life. The major characters are Kailas- Mira, Rakesh-Rashmi, Sir Arjun Mitra- Uma, Neil Berensen, Mrs. Narang and Mira, while minor characters are Abdul Rahma, Prakash Shukla, Hari Mohan, Dhiraj Singh, Somnath, Salim Celia, and Barbara.

Storm in Chandigarh (Published in 1969) is a novel with a perfect integration of the political and personal themes both of which meet in the person of Vishal Dubey. As indicative of the title, the political turmoil over Chandigarh between Punjab and Haryana remains at the center of the novel. Vishal Dubey, a young intelligent IAS along with Prasad, Trivedi and Kachru represents the bureaucracy, Harpal Singh and Gyan Singh the politicians, Inder, Jit Sahni, Nikhil Ray, Leela, Saroj, Mara, Gauri are the major characters in the novel. The novel provides unmistakable evidence that the novelist has developed a clear thought, vision, and maturity. The novel spotlights the fearsome jungle of man- woman relationship by the portrayal of three couples Inder- Saroj, Mara-Jit and Vishal- Leela. M.Narendra comments in Non Violence, Freedom and Equality in Storm in Chandigarh in The Indian Novel with Social Purposes:

Through the portrayal of three couples in storm in Chandigarh, Mrs. Sahgal clearly proves that marriage has become 'a vanishing search for communication'. According to her torture means nothing but living in intimacy all their adult lives and still remain strangers to each other.(80)

The Day in Shadow(1971) beginning from the point where storm in Chandigarh ends, can be read as a sequel to Strom in Chandigarh not only from thematic stand but also from the thrust of sustained moral vision



of the novelist that shapes and directs the destinies of the main characters. Simrit, the wife of social high-up son, disgruntled and dejected, yearns for freedom and finally gets divorce and with it come misery, hardship, and feeling of loneliness. The lack of sympathy and understanding in man-woman relationship leading to the failure of the marital bond and ultimate divorce is the linear theme of the novel.

Storm in Chandigarh, is political and personal novel basically concerned with the emotional effects of divorce on a woman. It is the story of Som and Simrit. Simrit longs for a world whose texture is kindly and soft whereas Som must have his pound of flesh, compelling her with his urgency, which she resists staying separate, excluded and rebellious.

Nayantara observes: “In this book I tried to figure out something that has happened to me- the shattering experience of divorce. I wanted to show how even in a country like ours, where women are equal citizens; a woman can be criminally exploited without creating a ripple”.

A Situation in New Delhi (1977) is a purely political novel where different concepts and ideologies of politicians clash together. It is somewhat real unfold of the inner thoughts, interests and loyalties of political leaders as well as leaders of various pressure groups. It is a novel of ideas where conflicts of ideas have been portrayed. The story builds up towards a sense of crisis which takes place by confrontation between the central protagonist Devi and her cabinet colleagues and in the rejection of Usman Ali’s plan for reforms in Educational System. At another level Rishad, leader of Naxalite group and son of Devi, involves himself in a crisis in the theatre where violence and non-violence are in Tense opposition and Rishad’s opposition of violence costs him with his violent death. Devi, emancipated women, widowed sister of Shivraj who dies in the opening of novel is the central figure.

Apart from Shivraj’s idealism and faith in human values, the novel reflects awareness and self-consciousness and passion for emancipation, self-recognition and a need for meaningful relationship through Nadira, Madhu and Skinny Jaipal.

Rich like US (1985) is dedicated to the Indo- British experience and what its shares have learned from each other, as ambiguous a dedication as the title which is both ironical and derogatory, says Jasbir Jain rightly in her appraisal of Nayantara Sahgal. “It is a novel that portrays various opinion and outlooks presented through various characters as they view the emergency imposed in 1977. “Central theme is one of obliteration, of being sucked in, imposed upon and becoming a willing partner to being wiped out.”

The theme of the novel is ingrained in the integrity and loyalty of Sonali and Rose and their sufferings and states of helplessness and how they are victimized. Both these women from two different cultures, social backgrounds and generations are women of a kind. Constantly they think of the past, relate to value-structures, believe integrity and integrated structures to be of significance to human being. But Rose’s murder and Sonali’s disillusionment reflects no way out of the degrading political system and devaluating human values. The major characters of the novel apart from Sonali and Rose are Dev, Ravi Kachru, Ram Swaroop, Kishorilal, Keshav Ranade, Nishi, Kiran, Monna, Bhabhijan, and Sonali’s mother and Sonali’s great grand-mother.

Plans for Departure (1986), Winner of the 1987 commonwealth Writers’ Prize for Eurasia is a fiction much praised for its realism, presentation of socio-cultural change and visionary moments between late 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The novel depicts the public issues subtly integrated and resolved with private issues. Sir Nitin Bose, the sixty- year- old botanist, his Danish Secretary Anna Hansen, Henry Brewster, the District Magistrate at Himapur, a serene hill station and the Missionary couple Mrs. And Mr. Croft and Nicholas are the principal characters in the novel.

The novel apart from political upheavals and movements between 1885 and 1914 depicts Anna Hansen, the central character's assertion of "her need to grow, not to content with mere wifhood; .....not to be born a man but to create more space around herself".

Mistaken Identity, 1988, another novel of Mrs. Sahgal is a comedy which displays decadent princely states of Vijaygarh's ruler's life and his family life. Though the central protagonist at one level is his son Bhusan Singh and at another level his wife Ranee. Bhusan Singh, a Hindu prince of small province falls in love with a Muslim girl, the daughter of comrade Yusuf and marries her. His mother also deserts his polygamous father and elopes with Yusuf. The novel ridicules the branding and identifying people into narrow spheres of Hindus and Muslims leaving behind the basic identity as human beings, as communal riots surge in the state as a result of marriage of Bhusan and Yusuf's daughter.

It is the story of Bhusan forging new ties, while his mother getting rid of old ties with his father. The novel is set during world war-I when outward turmoil sets inward turmoil to re-visualise and reorganize beliefs and to widen human perspectives. Nauzer Vacha advocate of Bhusan, Razia the imbecile childhood beloved of Bhusan and Sylla, the Parsi girl and girl friend of Bhusan, Bhajji the Gandhian leader are other characters of the novel.

Woman's subjugation, 'more subtle and deep-seated causes of woman's oppression, continued victimization, legal, economic and social restrictions on the basic rights of women, aroused consciousness of equal human value in sensitive writers and particularly women writers. This consciousness turns into a movement all over the world against the inequities prevailing in the society. Nayantara admits:-

For the first time I came across the shocking assumption of inequality. A man's ego and ambition I learned, must be served first. In case of conflict, the man's will and desires must prevail.... I was uneasy and restless adjusting to the demands of a personality and an environment whose goals and texture are different from anything I had known or been comfortable with (p. 15)

This admission serves to show the reflections of a writer's own life and what goes around him or her in his/her works. detailed analysis of the feminist views and how these novelists look through the prism of life to show feminine sensibility at work when the novelists present life-size women with throbbing pulse, yearning for love and recognition, longing for self expression and individual fulfillment. The analysis attempts to reveal how much they have succeeded in representing their feminine sensibility and deep insight and understanding in the portrayal of women characters at length and what tendencies they adopt and how their individual perception differs from that of other feminist thinkers and writers.

There may not be an overall –unanimity on the emergence of feminists thought but there is no doubt in calling, Mary Wollstoncraft (1750-1797) and John Stuart Mill (1806-1873) as the earliest crusaders of women's emancipation. Mary Wollstonecrafts' A Vindication of the Rights of Woman (1792) and Mill's work, the subjection of woman were the most controversial and aroused wide and violent response and hostility. Mill's views on liberty of women drew wide criticism. He wrote:

That the principle which regulates the

existing social relations between the two sexes- the legal subordination of one sex to the other- is wrong in itself, and now one of the chief hindrances to human improvement; and that it ought to be replaced by a principle of perfect equality, admitting no power or privilege on the one side, nor disability on the other. (p. 3)

Nayantara Sahgal's views are similar to those of J.S. Mill that women's position is not natural but the result of political oppression by men and need to be changed through a movement against male domination. Her comments and views deserve a reference here particularly as recounted to Jasbir Jain by the novelist in an interview. "I think of politics not as is leading the country or anything like but politics as the use of power, and also the abuse of power. In our context in happens at so many levels- the domestic level- misuse of power between husband and wife, parents and children, between lovers- the way one human being wields power over another, that too is politics. So a political would be an awareness of the use of power whether it is directly in politics or reflected in domestic life or other aspects of it, the husband-wife relationship that too is a political relationship. For instance in Storm in Chandigarh, Inder saying "Thou shalt have no other Gods before me", that's a political power of a kind. It also functions though religion. This episode in Rich Like us, that man is wielding religion, supposedly quoting the shastras saying sati is a good thing. Power at the village level can be religious fundamentalism. It can be wielded in many different ways, and all of it is political. (p.186)

Feminism holds that there is something wrong with society's treatment of women. It attempts to analyze the reasons for and dimensions of women's oppression, and to achieve women's liberation. To some, liberation is defined as social equality with men, while others feel that this narrow definition reflects the class bias of what is described variously as bourgeois feminism, career feminism, main stream feminism or liberal feminism. There are several views of feminists differing on the ideologist grounds.

The conservatives believe in the inherent unequal abilities of men and women and they emphasize that the main task of the state is to ensure that an individual performs his or her proper social function. They argue that social differentiation between the sexes is not unjust, since justice not only allows but also requires us to treat unequal unequally. Rousseau, Schopenhauer, Fichte (The science of Rights), Nietzsche ( Thus Spake Zarathustra ), Freud and Steven Goldberg are writers with conservative view points. Liberal feminists believe in libertarian for women as the freedom to determine their own social role and to compete with men on terms that are as equal as possible.

Marxist feminists view the oppression of woman as historically and currently a direct result of the institution of private property. Engels writes, "Within the family the husband is the bourgeois and the wife represents the proletariat". They see the oppression of women as a function of the larger socio-economic system.

Radical feminist writers like Ti Grace Atkinson and Shulamith Firestone deny the liberal claim that the basis of women's oppression consists in their lack of political or civil rights. Similarly they reject the classical Marxist view that basically women are oppressed because they live in a class society. They hold that the roots of women's oppression are biological. The origin of women's subjection lies in the fact that as result of the weakness caused by child bearing, women become dependent on men for physical survival. They believe in biological revival for women's liberation. Firestone writes:

The heart of women's oppression is her

childbearing roles. And in turn children are defined in relation to this role and are psychologically formed by it; what they become as adults and the sorts or relationships they are able to form determine the society they will ultimately build. (p.72)

## Conclusion

Thus looking at these various feminist viewpoints it may be remarked that the feminist consciousness is the consciousness of victimization and unjust treatment of women though the hostile power of oppression may differ in accordance to the ideologies or the vision adopted. What is significant is the need to profound changes in traditional social structures, family structures, and power of women, fundamental attitudes and personal relationships, leading to a just social order. Indian feminist writers present three images of woman: assertive i.e. progressive, submissive and compromising. Assertive i.e. progressive image is the advanced image of woman who is conscious of her identity, submissive image of woman is the traditional image of woman and the compromising image is the image of woman who seeks to change the status remaining with in some parameters without breaking from tradition.

Nayantara fulfills her function as a responsible writer. She depicts the social reality just for a fiction writer and she fulfills what is required of a novel as has been pointed out. Joan Rockwell also has similar views on fiction writing. He says: Fiction is not only a representation of social reality, but also a necessary function part of social control, and also paradoxically an important element in social change. It plays a part in the... conduct of politics and in general gives symbols and modes of life...in those less easily defined but basic areas such as norms, values, and personal and interpersonal behavior.

## Works cited

- Engels, Frederik.1942 (1884), Trans. Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State, Newtown, Resistance Books.
- Firestone, Shulamith. (1970),The Dialectic Sex. The Case for Feminist Revolution. New York:Bantam Books.
- Ibsen, Henrik. (1970), Four Major Plays vol. I, New York: Signet Classics.
- Jain, Jasbir.(1994), Nayantara Sahgal Stairs to the Attic II edition. Jaipur, Printwell Publishers.
- Mill, John Stuart.(1989),The Subjection of Women. (First published 1869). Cambridge, The M.I.T. Press.
- Mohanty, Chandra. (1988) “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses.” Feminist Review 30 (autumn)
- Rajan, Rajeshwari Sunder. (1993), Real and Imagined Women: Gender, Culture and Post Colonialism. London / New York: Routledge.



Rao, Malikarjuna.,P. Rajeshwar, M. (eds.) (1999) Indian Fiction In English. New Delhi:  
Atlantic Publishers.

Rockwell, Joan.(1974),Fact in Fiction: The Use of Literature in the Systematic Study of  
Society. London : Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Rogers, Katherine M.(1966), The Troublesome Helpmate: A History of Misogyny in Literature.  
Seattle: University of Washington.

Showalter, Elaine. ed. (1985), The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature and  
Theory. New York: Pantheon Books.

