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Feminist Issues in Nayantara Sahgal's Novel

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Abstract:

We are living in a male dominated society. This society is curbing the individuality of a woman from times immemorial. Though we read about the sacrifices of the Woman characters in history but all their contributions are veiled. Man has tried to change or to influence the outlook of the woman in general. Likewise in literature, English as well as Indo Anglian, this sexism has denied the place of identity to female writers. But as the time moved on, woman protested this male domination. In this paper we will discuss how the novelist Nayantara Sahgal has protested this exploitation; and how her characters respond to the society.

Keywords: *Dominated Society, Woman, Suffer, Female Writers*

Introduction:

Change is synonym with life and changes take place almost in every sphere of life in the twentieth century. These changes occur due to the overall development that take place in the twentieth century. This development was not confined to one sphere but affected every spheres of like - social, cultural, political, and educational. With this changing scenario and remarkable growth in every sphere, literature was also affected. The base for this development in literature was prepared way back in the beginning of the nineteenth century with the emergence of few female writers. Till then literature was considered as forte of male writers and women writers were either not thereof if they were, they wrote under male pseudonym because this was the field they were debarred of. The best example of male dominance can be witnessed in Mary Anne Evans who wrote under the pseudonym of George Eliot.

Literature at that time was dominated by male writers; female writers were forced to write under the male-pseudonym. Because of the gender bias women writers were denied higher education like their male counterparts as results there was dearth of female writers. Either there were no woman writers and those who wrote were not taken seriously and therefore they resorted to write under pseudonyms.

This kind of discrimination has taken place for centuries. Even in Victorian period this state of women education was not better than in nineteenth century. In the upper-class families girls were imparted only basic education and higher education was denied to them in compared to their male counterparts. Girls were merely confined to do household works and were made to learn needlework, dancing, singing and other activities that would help them in running their household.

The Victorian female writers have toiled hard to trace out the evolution and development of female writing. The most praiseworthy work in this field is done by Elaine Showalter in her essays **A Literature of their own** and **Toward a Feminist Poetics**, She has divided history of feminist writing in three stages The feminine, feminist and female stages. In *Towards a Feminist Poetics* Showalter observes that

“During the *Feminine phase*, dating from 1840 to 1880, women wrote in an effort to equal the intellectual achievement of male culture and internalized achievements of the male culture, and internalized its assumptions about female nature. The distinguishing sign of this period is male pseudonym, introduced in England in 1840s, and a national characteristic of English women writers ... The Feminist content of feminine art is typically oblique, displaced, ironic and subversive, one has to read it between the lines, in the missed possibilities of the text.”¹

In the *Feminist phase*, from about 1880 to 1920 or the winning of the vote, women, are historically enabled to reject the accommodating postures of femininity and to use literature to dramatize the ordeals of wronged womanhood....²

In the *Female Phase* ongoing since 1920, women rejected both imitation and protest two forms of dependency and turn instead to female experience as the source of an autonomous art, extending the feminist analysis of culture to the forms and technique of literature. Representatives of the formal female aesthetic, such as Dorothy Richardson and Virginia Woolf, begin to think in terms of male and female sentences, and divided their work into 'masculine' journalisms and 'feminine' fictions, redefining and sexualizing external and internal experiences”...³

This observation by Elaine Showalter gives an insight into the basis of feminist movement. With the advent of twentieth century the feminist movement intensified. Woman set themselves free from the shadow of male influences and expressed themselves freely. They explored freely social, cultural, and political themes. They moved outside the narrow roles of male's helpmates and

established their own identity. They hated being called a 'weaker sex'.

Woman emerged as an active participant in the social and political life of their country. Our country, India, is no exception. From Laxmi Bai to Sarojini Naidu women have played influential roles in the social and political life of our country. Female writers expressed their views freely on pre-independence and post-independence era. Nayantara Sahgal, Anita Desai, Kamala Markandhya, Bharti Mukherjee wrote about political and social life of pre and post independence era. They wrote about women, their conflicts and their role in society. Male writers like Raja Rao, V.S. Naipaul, R.K. Narayan and Mulk Raj Anand wrote about female characters besides covering political and social themes. These male writers also in one way or the other supported the feminist Movement.

Nayantara Sahgal an eminent Indian writer in English was born on May 10, 1927 in Allahabad to Vijay Laxmi and Ranjit Pandit. She is niece of Jawahar Lai Nehru and cousin of Indira Gandhi. She belonged to a famous political family and therefore her writings are directly influenced by her first hand experience of pre and post independent India. She got her early education in India but due to the political turmoil in the country, she at the age of sixteen sailed to America along with her sister. She spent four years in Wellesley, and then returned India in October, 1947. She married an NRI Gautam Sahgal and migrated to America, but their marriage didn't work and after a long contemplation eventually ended in divorce, After this tragic divorce she decided to make a life with Nirmal Mangat Rai without entering into conventional institute of marriage.

A Time To Be Happy was her first novel published in 1958. The novel touches the ending days of independence struggle in India. It deals with the cultural conflict experienced by Sanad, the protagonist Sanad comes to India as an employ of British firm. He lands in India on August 9, 1942. The historic day when the Quit India Movement started, Sanad felt the sense of alienation and rootlessness in his own country. His problem is that of regaining his roots, of belonging:

It occurred to him that his parents had gone to a great deal of trouble and expenses moulding him to be a figure that would never have any reality.⁴

To overcome this sense of alienation, he marries Kusum, a typical Indian girl. The novel beautifully portrays, Sanad's conflict, self-pity arising out of a sense of alienation and then reaching to a firm resolution in the end.

After **A Time To Be Happy**, she published her second autobiography **from Fear Set Free** in 1962. Her first autobiography **Prison and Chocolate Cake** was published in 1954.

Sahgal's third novel, **This Time of Morning**, was published in 1965. The novel like her most of the novels deals with upper class intellectuals, sophisticated officials, scheming politicians, ambitious civil servants, their pretty but dissatisfied better-halves, and foreign advisor ,with an eye on Indian beauty. The novels depict dissatisfaction on both political and social level. The novel on one

hand depicts the corrupt socio-political state of affairs after independence and on the other hand it depicts. Rashmi, the heroine's sense of dissatisfaction from her marriage; and desire to get free from such useless stifling relationship both the themes run parallel and form and interesting reading.

Storm in Chandigarh (1969) was her fourth novel. The novel describes the political turmoil in Punjab after 1947. It revolves around the theme of division of Punjab in two states - Punjabi speaking Punjab and Hindi speaking Haryana with common capital Chandigarh. The novel beautifully depicts the affect it had on masses and the unrest in society because of this division. Through this political drama is reflected the person tensions, in form on uneasy marriages of three young couples: Vishal-Leela, Inder-Saroj and Jit-Mara. In the novel apart from an obvious physical violence, Sahgal depicts the invisible violence of inflicting one person's will on another. Besides political turmoil, Sahgal is also concerned with failures of marital relationship which she beautifully portrays through Vishal, Leela, Inder, Saroi, Jit and Mara. After this novel she wrote a supplementary history text, for schools, **Freedom Movement** in India in 1970.

Sahgal's fifth novel **A Day in Shadow** was published in 1977. The novel deals with the suffocating marriage of Som and Simrit. Som, is a hard, hearted business man and uses everything as a commodity, even his wife Simrit. He is indifferent and insensitive to the emotions and feelings of Simrit. He is not at all concerned with her desires and aspirations and one day when Simrit made a little tough effort to make Som realize of her desires, Som leaves her with an ultimatum of divorce. It was a brutal divorce settlement which Raj termed as 'Shylock's share'. The novel heralds the rise of new woman. Simrit unlike traditional women takes a bold step and accepts divorce. With the help on a young M.P. Raj she faces bravely the divorce settlement which puts her into the heavy burden of taxes. Simrit's courage deserve respect which women ought to show if they desire respect from society.

Sahgal's sixth novel was **Situation in New Delhi**, published in 1977. The novel takes into account the political scenario after the end of Nehru's era. The image of Nehru is symbolized into charismatic young Prime Minister Shivraj Legacy of Shivraj which supported non-violence is contrasted with Rishad who represents the frustration of youth. The novel gives the realistic account of confused, bewildered, and misguided youth who believe that changes in the society could be brought only through violence. They believe that the violence is the only means to awake this inert society. The novel also embodies all the common properties of Sahgal's novels - man-woman relationship and quest for identity.

Rich Like Us her seventh novel was published in 1985. The novel can be divided into two parts - first dealing with the selfish bureaucrats of India and other dealing with female psychology, their morals, values, and conflicts. The novel also portray cultural - conflict through marriage of Ram

and Rose. Both these themes are complimentary to each other. The novel shows the emergence of new and strong women in the form of Sanali Ranade. She is an I.A.S. Officer and lives life on her own terms. She is contrasted with Ravi Kachru, who too is an LA.S. Officer and through his shrewd bureaucracy he becomes right hand man of Madam (Prime Minister). As in Sahgal's other novels, the love relationship of Sonali and Ravi suffers due to Ravi's political pursuits and differences in their ideology. But Sonali emerge as a strong new women and embraces life of freedom. 9. Even when Ravi in the end tries to reconcile with her she politely refuses because she is in no mood to give up her freedom.

Sahgal's novel *Rich Like Us* was awarded the **Sinclair Prize** for fiction in 1985, and **Sahitya Academy Award** in 1985. *Plans for Departure* won the **Commonwealth Writers Prize for Eurasia** in 1987.

Conclusion:

Sahgal has been active in literacy activities for more than two decades. She is the only distinguished political novelist of the IndoAnglian literary scene. Her novels reflect not only her personal values but also changing values of society. In almost all her novels Sahgal deals with political themes and man-woman relationship. In novels like 'The Day in Shadow', 'This Time of Morning', and 'Storm in Chandigarh' she deals with both political and social themes. Her novels display effect of politics on social and married life in a very subtle way. Vishal in *Storm in Chandigarh* oscillates between his political missions and personal sympathies. *This Time of Morning* depicts the emergence of new women. Rashmi, wife of an IFS officer is contrasted with her mother Mira. While Rashmi does not believe in carrying on relationships which are useless, divorce for her traditional mother is a sin. In her novels, Sahgal deals with the problems of educated women. Marital disharmony, search for self-identity, cultured conflicts and craving for freedom are some of the themes depicted in her political base novels. Theme of East-West encounter and alienation is also touched by her in novels, *The Time To Be Happy* and *Rich Like Us*. She has also raised feminine issues like childless woman, a single woman, marital disharmony; male dominance over female, dual code of conduct in her novels like 'Rich Like Us', 'Down the Shadow' and 'This time of Morning'. Sahgal in her novels show how political life affects our social life. The values, traditions, ideas, and ideology that we inherit from our culture and society leaves its impact on our social, political and personal life and one cannot deny this fact depicted by Sahgal in her novels.

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