
A Study of Women, Politics and Society in the Novels of Nayantara Sahgal

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Abstract:

In the present study, the researcher gives a glimpse of Women, Politics and Society as shown in the novels of Nayantara Sahgal. Nayantara Sahgal's novels deal with an Indian form of writing which emerges from the Indian context and addresses the novels of Indian people. Her novels portray the picture of the contemporary women having desires and aspirations, hopes and frustrations. In all her novels, Nayantara Sahgal explores the emotional world of women along with her concern with politics. The major political events set up the background for her novels and portray the cultural and social changes in Indian society. Sahgal's engrossment with politics as well as her continually raising marital problems establishes a correlation between her own life and the themes of her novels. Sahgal, in all her novels, relates the themes of politics with the theme of man – woman relationship, their marital problems and the problem of the status of women in society.

Keywords: Feminism, Women, Marriage, Exploitation, Freedom, Politics, Society & Culture.

Introduction:

Nayantara Sahgal is a prominent Indian novelist who has formulated a new outlook of understanding women. The works of Nayantara Sahgal presents a contiguity of two worlds: the personal world of man – woman relationship and the impersonal world of politics. In all her novels, the major themes are socio – political background of the country, east – west confrontation, man – woman relationship, lack of harmony and disintegration in marriage and man's quest for identity. Sahgal's major women characters benefit to the occurrence of transformation and they deal effectively with the adversative impact of tradition and modernity in their search for identity, independence and affection within or outside marriage. The feminist and socio – political world made through her fictional writing makes Nayantara Sahgal one of the most eminent Indian women novelists writing in English.

Maya, a female character in Sahgal's novel *A Time To Be Happy*, tries to get the acceptance of her husband but due to their lack of communication and understanding in marriage finds herself sentimentally detached. Due to the conflicting persona of

Maya and her husband, their marriage was unsuccessful from the beginning. Maya skips her sadness and despair by making herself busy in social work and religion. Through the character of Maya, Sahgal throws light on women's search for liberty both within marriage as equal partners and outside marriage as individuals. Sahgal also demonstrates that her women even suffering of marital conflict or loneliness in life assume social or religious activities.

In the novel *This Time of Morning*, Nayantara Sahgal highlights on the position of women in Indian society before marriage and tries to show the traditional prejudiced Indian society where parents select their life partners. The female characters Uma and Leela try to make use of men for their search for freedom but that results in self-harm. Celia, Barbara and Nita's dependence on Kalyan makes them fail in their search for identity. Nita's inner desire for love is an attempt to satisfy her desire for communication through a pre-marital relationship with Kalyan but her parents decide her future through marriage. Nayantara Sahgal clarifies it through the character of Nita that a woman with such life will never be accepted in a conservative family or society.

Nayantara Sahgal's novel *Storm in Chandigarh* describes violence, confusion and the upset political situation in the partition of Punjab into newly formed states Punjab and Haryana with Chandigarh as the common capital. In this novel, Sahgal studies the impact of this political circumstance into the lives of young

couples Inder and Saroj, Jit and Mara, Vishal and Leela, Nikhil and Gauri and depicts their marital, pre-marital and extra-marital relations, the reasons of disturbances, unhappiness and loneliness in marriages. Sahgal believes that the reason for the disturbance in the relationship between man and woman is partly in their inherent frailty of man indulging in adultery and partly in maintaining the unnatural position of the husband or the wife in the family. Through this novel, Sahgal considers that marriage is not just for sexual gratification but it is a mutual bond which should be kept on equal terms with great love, care and understanding, otherwise it results in unrest and destruction.

In the novel *The Day in Shadow*, Sahgal tells about the struggle of Simrit, a young, handsome and courageous Indian woman who is burdened with a ruthless divorce settlement. Simrit continually has to face the torture of her husband Som and she feels herself suffocating with him, so she decides to ask for divorce to be free from him. The cruel-minded Som designs a ruthless divorce settlement, according to which the property and other shares worth six lakhs are transferred to Simrit's name and these possessions are later inherited by Brij. Som has planned this settlement so that he can get rid of paying tax on those possessions and besides can get income over it. This divorce settlement made Simrit upset both emotionally and physically and it became a burden for her living as she reluctantly had to pay the heavy taxes imposed on the possessions without having

any right over the property. By presenting the problems of Simrit in the novel, Sahgal depicts how a divorced woman passes her life with pain and misery and the hardships she experiences at the hands of merciless and unjust male – dominated society in India.

Sahgal in her novel *A Situation in New Delhi*, emphasizes on the political as well as feminine theme through the female characters of Devi, Nadira, Madhu and Suvarnapriya who are undergoing through the intense feelings of solitude, emptiness and sadness in their lives due to their narrow – minded, cruel and reckless husbands. The novel reaches its peak when Madhu is ruthlessly raped in the office of the Registrar on the University campus. When Madhu doesn't get any support from her family and fails to find relief and comfort from any side, she seeks redemption through death and commits suicide. Through the incident of rape with Madhu, Sahgal tries to present the picture of an inhuman society, where women are not safe even on university campus in the capital city of the country and advises the society to change the attitude towards women.

The novel *Rich Like Us* clearly presents the various forms of discrimination, injustice, violence and corruption prevailing in the society due to the Emergency imposed by Indira Gandhi. In this novel, Sahgal concerns with love, marriage and devotion to the partner through the characters of Rose, Mona and Ram. For man, marriage means getting all

the privileges at every stage while for woman it means a life of complete devotion to her husband, akin to the service of a master. Through the character of Sonali, Sahgal exhibits the abuse of women even in the administrative system of the country. Sahgal portrays her woman character Rose as merciful and upholder, Mona as self – reliant and self – respecting and the narrator Sonali as individualistic, idealistic and outspoken. Sahgal highlighted the fact that woman suffered more and her female characters have the imprint of new woman.

Nayantara Sahgal's novel *Plans for Departure* presents a picture of restlessness and bitterness in the married life of the couples Henry Brewster and Stella, Marlowe Craft and Lulu, due to extra – marital relationship of these characters. In the novel, Sahgal conveys the feminine side through the self – realization of female characters such as Anna and Stella who claim to fulfill their desires as per their wish. Sahgal presents most of the characters planning departure for different reasons as the title of the novel suggests. Sahgal uncovers the secret of Stella and Lulu's death where the killers are none other than their own husbands. Both Stella and Lulu were unhappy in their married life and intended to make a departure from their matrimonial bond but Sahgal paradoxically made them to depart from earth. Through the novel, Sahgal project's various themes that include human relations, East – West encounter and the status of woman in the society, and reveals that woman ultimately suffers in a male – dominated society.

Sahgal's political novel *Mistaken Identity* demonstrates the socio – political events in India during the British rule when the country was quietly waking up to nationalism with demands for independence. The novel is seen through the eyes of Bhushan Singh, son of landlord Raja, whose identity is mistaken, he is accused of betrayal and he is imprisoned. While in prison, Bhushan, along with other prison mates, introspects his own life and the condition of his country in religious and social contexts. The novel displays the feminist context through the character of Ranee of Vijaygarh. In the novel, Sahgal tries to inspect the status of female characters in the society with which they relate. Sahgal's description of the contrasting relation between Ranee and Yusuf and his daughter in matrimonial relation with Bhushan and Bhushan's earlier sexual relations with his three lovers Razia, Wille-May and Sylla all reflect her concern for all those women who suffer in silence. Sahgal also depicts secularist type of relations between the characters by narrating the love between Razia and Bhushan, relation between Ranee and Yusuf and the marriage between Yusuf's daughter and Bhushan. In the novel, Sahgal's characters rise above the obstacles of communal violence to lead a life of communal harmony at a time when the nation was pull apart by communal violence.

Review of Literature:

The major studies on the works of Sahgal comprise Ritu Menon's biographical work *Out Of Line: A Literary and Political Biography of Nayantara Sahgal* which gives a detailed account of Sahgal's life. B. P. Sinha in his book *Feminist Concept; A Study of Nayantara Sahgal's Fiction* analyses the various nuances of feminism and his other book *Social and Political Concern in the Novels of Nayantara Sahgal* demonstrates the socio – political – cultural beliefs of the changing India, by exploring the women characters of Sahgal both morally and psychologically who are trapped in mental uncertainty and continual process of disgrace. Manmohan Bhatnagar in his book *The Fiction of Nayantara Sahgal* explores the various dimensions of the themes in Nayantara Sahgal's novels with an intensive analysis of Sahgal, who concerns with the unfortunate situation of an individual, exploited in cultural, sexual, social and political conflicts.

Objectives of the Study:

The main objectives and reasons for conducting this research are:

1. First, to examine Nayantara Sahgal's novels on feminist ground and to find out how her feminist concerns help women to identify with the constant search of self-discovery and self-realization that life has to be lived completely in a meaningful discipline.
2. Attempt to find out from her novels the perceived issues

of women such as personal sufferings and losses, dissonance and disintegration of marriages that are responsible for leading women into a world of sadness and impossibilities.

3. To make out how Sahgal's female characters react to the problems in society such as endeavour bravely for liberation from the society's conservative ideals and revolting against the oppressed way regulations of religious ideologies.
4. To find out what Sahgal has achieved through her novels – treatment of specific forms of female suffering and harassment like child marriage, sati, dowry deaths, social segregation of widows, sexual exploitation and smuggling of teenage girls, psychological exploitation and savagery in families. Liberation of female from the inequitable male – dominated society through the changing social forms and social sophistication.
5. Finally, to examine Sahgal's novels on socio – political grounds and to explain what the society needs to do against the political tension,

violence and unfairness to man. The major reason of all the evils prevailing in the society is the failure of the political and economic system in our society which can be rectified by collective and appropriate action.

Research Methodology:

This research paper is based on the Feminist and New Historicist approaches of criticism by comparing, contrasting and analyzing the primary sources, supported by exploring various important secondary sources such as essays, articles and interviews of Nayantara Sahgal. Sahgal has been critically studied based on the doctrines that best suit her works particularly feminist and new historicism. Sahgal, in all her works, has strived for the empowerment and freedom of women. She analyzed the status of women in the socio – political, socio – economic and socio – cultural landscape on the one hand and on the other she manifested and struggled against the evils encountered by the society in the pre – independence and the post – independence India, mainly due to the political ambiguousness.

Hypothesis:

The study seeks to find out not only the emergence of 'new woman' but the emergence of a 'new human condition' where women feel convenient, blessed, accepted, motivated and fearless. All this can take place only when there is a better understanding among men and women, and women are less sentimental and men are

more understanding, gentle, generous, impartial and gracious for women. The fate of the country can change only when there is a change in the political condition and the political leadership which is without political ambitions and is fighting with a true heart for a reasonable motive. Change is the key point of life, nothing remains stable and things are ever emerging. An intensive and creative study of Sahgal's novels has been done to bring forth affirmation of these notions of 'change' and 'new human condition' that manifested from her novels.

Conclusion:

This research paper discloses the fact that the novels of Nayantara Sahgal deal with the diverse reflections of women, politics and society. In all her novels, there is a reflection of the postcolonial perspectives and a new feminine ethic and new humanism. Sahgal's female characters are victims of a traditional society that does not allow women to set up their own identity. Sahgal considers firmly about female exploitation and male ridicule on the issue of women's identity crisis and invokes for social justice and freedom for women. Sahgal, in her novels, depicts a new ethic, according to which, woman should not be taken only as a commodity of lust for amusement and temporal gratification, but as an equal and respected companion of man. Sahgal has used her personal and literary walk of life as a forum to make the novel a medium of social and political transformation. Obviously, Sahgal through her novels searches for a society which is

set free of social, economic and political evils.

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