

Submissive and rebellious women: A study of Nayantara Sahgal's select novels

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Abstract

Nayantara Sahgal is one of our best Socio-political novelists today. She is authentic and vivid in rendering the contemporary Indian urban culture with all its inherent contradictions and imposed controversies. Mrs. Sahgal is indeed qualified to write political novels of high quality. In her novels Mrs. Sahgal has raised some basic problems pertaining to personal relationship and her portrayal of politics is just a part of her humanistic concern because it reveals her deep insight into human psyche. All her major characters of the novels are centripetally drawn towards the vertex of politics. Besides politics, her fiction also draws attention on Indian women's search for sexual freedom and self-realization. This paper studies both the submissive and rebellious women in Sahgal's novels. It also highlights her women characters, with a view to understand and appreciate their trials and tribulations under the impact of the conflicting influence of tradition and modernity.

Keywords: submissive, rebellious, nayantara sahgal's

1. Introduction

Nayantara Sahgal's novels read like commentaries on the political and social turmoil's that India has been facing since Independence. Her concern for the women, who are caught in the dilemma of liberty and traditionalism, or stability and protection of marriage, is exhibited in almost all her novels. There is a sea change between the character and attitude of the heroines in her earlier novels and the later one. The heroines in the earlier novels found the age-old oppression of Indian culture and tradition too formidable to set aside or ignore. They were to go by the 'norms' and lead a submissive life or a seemingly happy life lest they be thrown out of the protective familial circle.

But in her later novels the heroines such as Simrit, Saroj and Devi grew bold enough, as Sahgal did in her own life, to throw away the shackles. They began to feel the oppression that the duty of the 'self' weighs greater than the duty to the family or society. We see such a gradual change for the better in the mental makeup of the heroines of the novel as we take up a study of her novels chronologically.

Freedom for Sahgal means a mental or emotional attitude transcending economic or social aspects. She exhorts woman to develop a sense of awareness as individuals stubbornly refusing to tolerate injustice in any form. A woman should not allow herself to be considered as an object of sex. There was a transitional phase when Indian women had to face the conflict between tradition and modernity. Promila Kapur observes: 'Husbands like their wives to take up jobs but dislike them to change at all as far as their attitude towards their roles and stances at home is concerned and dislike their traditional responsibilities being neglected' (Love, Marriage, Sex and the Indian Women, 194)

Sahgal criticizes the double standard of the society that looks at the excesses of a man and a woman in a strongly different way, mostly unfavorable to woman. In a man any such crossing over

boundary is considered natural or at least not much to be concerned about, whereas in a woman, even a minor offence is nothing but a serious, heinous crime. Even when a woman is raped, the blame is heaped upon the woman and the sufferer is the woman. Her own parents, instead of showing pity to the poor girl, look at her with contempt, sinful, soiled and immoral. Madhu, after being raped by a group of university students, finding no sympathy from any quarter, chooses to burn herself to death in a Situation in New Delhi. Sahgal finds fault with the Indians for their inactivity or apathy to suffering and she blames it squarely on the fatalistic, philosophic attitude nurtured by our ancient tradition.

Sahgal portrays women of older generation, their anger or protest, but who would not break the traditional codes, or did not grow bold enough to break the fetters and come out. The two women Mona and Rose are an interesting contrast. Mona is bound to the shackles of Hindu tradition, docile and acquiescent. Rose is a liberal, non-conformist Christian, believing in her own instincts. But both are equally corrupted and exploited by the male dominated society.

We see a gradual progression in the vision of Sahgal regarding the role and character of women in society, in the earlier novels we see the heroines, though impelled by a yearning to set themselves free "to break off the orthodox Indian conventions and moribund tradition." (New Dimensions of Indian English Novel 61) do not have the courage to put their ideals into reality. But in the later novels we see them grew bolder and are able to resist, breaking the shackles in their to retain their self-abnegated identity. Sahgal's world consists of two types of women characters-the first group consists of women who are happy in the confines Hindu orthodoxy and the other of those with a strong sense of individuality and an analytical mind but shuttling between tradition and modern values. Rashmi, Devika, Mira, Gauri, Mona belong to the first type and Simrit, Saroj to the second. We find Sahgal's women do not repudiate

marriage. When they find that they are being oppressed, treated as commodities rather than as human beings, they naturally rebel. They resent compartmentalization as men and women with some exclusive rights and duties.

Sahgal strongly pleads for a real change in the condition of woman from being a toy in the hands of a man to becoming a partner in life with equal rights and dignity. The male chauvinism fortified and nurtured by tradition is portrayed by Ram, Rose's husband in *Rich like Us*. Marrying as many wives as possible is a legacy-inherited, claims Ram. Polygame is male's prerogative. He cites Lord Krishna himself who had two wives apart from innumerable gopikas. He says:-

I know a man who keeps his first wife and five children
In his village and lives here in town with his second wife
But everyone knows about the arrangement, so what is
The point of hiding it (*Rich* 60)

Rose, strayed from the country, from her people, betrayed by her husband, reduced to almost a beggar, suffers another form of sati. In *Saroj in Chandigarh*, Sahgal represents the unsympathetic, cruel treatment meted out in the hands of her husband Inder, and in *Simrit in The Day in Shadow*, she represents the callous attitude of her husband Som who almost cripples his financially in the name of consent terms after divorce.

Sahgal in her early novels portrays women who value chastity, acceptance and compromise though endowed with a spirit of questioning attitude. Her later novels show a decided venturesome spirit where her women characters do not hesitate to break the tradition, cross the age-old formidable boundaries and set up a life of their own. *Rashmi in This Time of Morning* come out of marriage that had become an emotional wasteland. *Saroj in Storm in Chandigarh* left her jealous, unreasonable, unfaithful husband though she had two children and another one in her womb. *Sonali in Rich like Us* oppressed by injustice was bold enough to resign her past rather than submit herself to humiliating submission. What Sahgal envisages is the emergence of new *Sitas* and *Savithiris*, stripped of false dignity and crowned with human virtue and courage.

Extra marital relation is not a solution to marital problems. The fulfillment of husband-wife expectations from each other and understanding, respect with love is essential for success in marriage relationship.

Conclusion

Thus Sahgal makes her heroines bold enough to come out of the traditional rut, at least in her later novels. There are of course, drastic revolutionary steps taken by the heroines of the Indian surrounding. But Sahgal seems to assert than an individual has a greater duty to the self than to the society with its unreasonable code of conduct.

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