

## **Assertive power: As portrayed in Nayantara Sahgal's: A situation in New Delhi**

**Ashish Sangwan**

Department of English, Ch. Bansilal Govt. College, Loharu, Bhiwani, Haryana, India

### **Abstract**

Women have been suppressed since times immemorial, their Assertive Power was mainly focused in Indian English fiction when feminism, as a new way of life, as a new perspective, came into existence in India with the feminine psyche trying to redefine the women's role in the society. Nayantara Sahgal can be discussed prominently as a writer who most unequivocally articulates her dissent of the conventional Indian hierarchisation, which placed women in a subservient position. However, the process, in reality has been a slow and painful one for women since they have had to overcome social opinion and orthodoxy on the one hand and personal hesitation and insecurities on the other. The process of self-awareness, assertion and the quest for identities requires conducive social circumstances as well as sensitivity and fineness of individual sensibility. In Nayantara Sahgal's first novel, *A Time to be Happy*, Kusum initiated the process towards selfhood unconsciously, but Saroj, Simrit and others consciously release it in her later novels. Sahgal's women are not a mere "Goddess or an automation" they pass through a processes of transformation and move from weakness to strength, from indecision to self-assertion and from bondage to freedom.

**Keywords:** situation, nayantara sahal

### **Introduction**

Women have been suppressed since times immemorial, their Assertive Power was mainly focused in Indian English fiction when feminism, as a new way of life, as a new perspective, came into existence in India with the feminine psyche trying to redefine the women's role in the society. The novelists have either glorified and idealized their women or exposed their pathetic plight. They often write about the Indian women who have been sufferers for ages but now want to get out of these age old traditions and customs which instead of doing any good to them have rather curbed their freedom and their right to life.

During the Vedic period, Indian woman enjoyed the pride place with the extraordinary scholars like Gargi, Maitreeji, Lapomundra, who walked equally with men. Even Sita, Savitri, Shakuntla and Draupadi, who make their appearance at later period in his history, were not passive, submissive, docile and servile. But Manu's male dominated code of conduct enunciated in Manu Sanhita that the woman in India last her pedestal, and disappeared behind the purdah during the Muslim rule. It was only during India's Independence Movement, that Gandhi freed women from their tyrannical life, and plunged them into the freedom movement. Then women broke their chains, walked hand in hand with men, raising their little fingers against the unmitigated autocratic rule at home and abroad. This protest of women was voiced in many forms in Indian English fiction. Not only women writers, like Anita Desai, Nayantara Sahgal, Shashi Deshpande, and Kamala Markandaya but also male writers lit Tagore, Mulk Raj Anand, R.K. Narayan, etc. Dwell on the tortured womanhood. Nayantara Sahgal can be discussed prominently as a writer who most unequivocally articulates her dissent of the conventional Indian hierarchisation, which placed women in a subservient position. However, the process, in reality has been a slow and painful one for women since they have had to overcome social opinion and orthodoxy on the one hand and personal

hesitation and insecurities on the other. The process of self-awareness, assertion and the quest for identities requires conducive social circumstances as well as sensitivity and fineness of individual sensibility. In Nayantara Sahgal's first novel, *A Time to be Happy*, Kusum initiated the process towards selfhood unconsciously, but Saroj, Simrit and others consciously release it in her later novels. Sahgal's women are not a mere "Goddess or an automation" they pass through a processes of transformation and move from weakness to strength, from indecision to self-assertion and from bondage to freedom.

The task of creating awareness amongst women has not only been done by Nayantara Sahgal but also by several other Indian women novelists as they are the ones who can really feel the pains and pressures of the male dominance. They are the ones who can effectively raise the women question and creating awareness for the rest. The women characters which delineate in their writings are a reflection of their own perplexities, bewilderment, sense of isolation, fear and emotional vulnerability. They make an attempt to overcome this state and find new horizons of self-esteem and liberation. As far as Nayantara Sahgal is concerned, she voices the new women's:

Objection to be treated as a doormat or a piece of furniture meant for the convenience of man. The new woman refuses to be stifled under oppressive reflections...2 She rebels against the hostile environment in which a woman is forced to live. Generally, Sahgal's women try to seek fulfillment in marriage but if they fail to attain it, they strive to move out of this bond. A woman's craving for being treated as man's equal and her longing for things like mutual trust, love and understanding has been brought out very clearly in her novels. Her personal agonies and traumas are also reflected in her novels. Talking of her own experiences in marriage she candidly confesses: For the first time I came across the socking assumption of inequality. A man's ego and Ambition learned, must be served

first. In case of conflict, the man's desire must prevail. I was uneasy and restless, adjusting to the demands of a personality and an environment whose goals and texture were different from anything I had known or been comfortable with.<sup>3</sup> Nayantara Sahgal's novels stress on the independent existence of women and make all the attempts to exclude them from the center stage of human existence focusing chiefly on the question of an identity crisis for women. Her novels reveal the conflict between tradition and modernity in India in the late twentieth century. Generally her women are traditional but they revolt against those traditions which question their identity and endanger women's pivotal role in the family and society.

Sahgal's fifth Novel, *A Situation in New Delhi* (1977) focuses on a particular human situation which is replete with drama and action; and the scope of the novel is to a large extent limited to the author's own field experience. A very attractive widow Devi, the heroine, is the main protagonist of the novel and holds the post of the Education Minister in the Central Cabinet after the death of her brother Shivraj, a charismatic figure in Indian politics. Like her other novels, in this novel also Sahgal seems to be bound within the customary orbit, namely women in relation to men in her life. Therefore, the narration concentrates more on Devi's personal life with her lovers in the past and present, her son and her memories of the illustrious brother, Shivraj than on her role as the Education Minister. According to Sahgal, the new Indian woman who has been mentioned is not real but merely her dream. In fact the writer eagerly waits for such a woman who would be able to take decisions confidently and be able to fight against the people who are ready to subdue her. Over a long period women have been suppressed in India because of which their growth has been stunted. Ironically though in ideology she is metaphorically called a 'Goddess' and in Sanskrit there is a saying, 'Gods dwell in the place where women is worshipped', yet in practice male chauvinism has deliberately reduced her to a mental cripple. A study of Sahgal's novels shows that her female characters, major or minor, are dependent on male friends and companions for their survival. It is true that they have the strength to revolt against their unhappy circumstances and get a separation or divorce from their husbands as Simrit and Saroj do. However, despite such a bold act they see another emotional companion. One way of looking at it can be that nature has made women physically weaker, which in turn weakens her psyche. To quote P.A. Sorokin:

Culture is the sum total of everything that is created, as modified through conscious or unconscious behavior of two or more interacting individuals.<sup>4</sup> The modern woman has to step out of this culture and to be able to assert herself and create an identity of her own. In her interview to S. Varalakshmi, Nayantara Sahgal has defined her New Woman in the following words: . . . there is no such thing as a modern Indian. . . . We have invented that person every time, we are so much a mixture of past and present, we are so swept by different tides. The modern Indian has yet to arrive, yet to emerge as a fully developed human being. . . . Sonali. . . . She is a complete invention. She is my dream of what somebody should have done at that time.<sup>5</sup> The modern woman in India is, therefore, Sahgal's vision which she projects through her novels as is her vision of a

change in social attitudes to woman in rural and urban society.

Devi of *A Situation in New Delhi* is a very different character created by Sahgal. Men are unable to use her for their benefit but it is she who uses them in her life for their survival. Both Michael and Usman, because of their personal dissatisfaction allow themselves to be used. Here the novelist presents another facet of man-woman relationship. Devi's short-lived married life with Ishwer does not quench her emotional and physical thirst. Her sexual hunger forces her to develop relations first with Michael and then with Usman. But her loyalty to her brother, Shivraj, does not allow her to continue her sexual relations with Michael. Through the character of Devi, Sahgal presents the character of an ideal parents completely different from the traditional Indian parents. Unlike the parents of *This time of Morning* who 'demand obedience and respect for their elders'<sup>6</sup> and neglect 'the most important potential in our country, our young.'<sup>7</sup> Devi never imposes her views, her desires on her son and listens to him when he wants to attend Pinky's engagement party:

"What in the world will I do there? Besides, that kind of marriage is first organized rape" One way or another the hideous word kept figuring in her day. "Pinky hasn't been allowed to nose out of the house without her mother's permission. And now they're handing her over like a pudding to that nitwit who hasn't put his nose out of his house-his mental nose anyway. Talk about rape at the University. I think this is quite obscure." (p. 25) In *A Situation in New Delhi*, the dilemma with which Devi awakes one day after Shivraj's death, is symptomatic of the duality of the existence of a politician: When Devi opened her eyes her first drowsy thought was that she has nothing suitable to wear to the party she was attending that night, or to any coming social event, and that it might be weeks before she could go shopping to her heart's content. (p. 14). However one may hate ". . . this side of . . . life to be cluttered with the other" . (p. 60), the two, as a perceptible observer like Michael realizes, cannot be kept apart: A populist democracy is like a rough ocean banging the rocks at its edge and reducing them at times to sliding gravel. (p.17). Equally, the public is also making too many demands on the Minister. Devi knew this was the normal flow and gush of political life, and that one had to sacrifice his personal life if he wanted to succeed in politics. However, it was not easy to divorce the instinctive, the personal from one's public self. Even Devi was not ready to end her life after husband's Ishwar's death. She wanted to live and life is something which is precious to anyone whether they are politicians or not. Since Devi was fully committed to her duty towards Shivraj, She had to accept unemotionally that being Shivraj's sister meant sacrificing her personal life and living perpetually in limelight and, unable to do the things that other people could. In fact, the ghost of her brother haunted her always even in her private relationships: Devi unlike most women had a complete absorption with love-making, everything was forgotten while her overwhelming need consumed her and while she yielded . . . (p. 54) Devi is an exception among Sahgal's women. She has already not only realized but found her own identity and therefore to fight anyone for her identity like Sahgal's other women. She has not only an imposing personality but also an unyielding authority. In real sense, among Sahgal's women it is she (Devi) who has achieved the

dream of equality of sexes. She communicates and interacts with her male acquaintances as she does with the females. In the entire novel, we do not find a show of weakness simply because she is a woman unlike Sahgal's other woman characters. She enjoys her freedom and does not hesitate to have a number of affairs with men. Generally it is supposed that it is easy for men to use a spinster but it is not so with Devi, for she is not only an independent lady but also a powerful one. She bears bravely the untimely death of her husband, Ishwar and instead of becoming weak and seeking help from other men, she becomes stronger and uses men for her satisfaction. Even though Devi is an exceptionally strong woman yet she spends half of her life as a shadow of her brother. It seems that even though Sahgal's women have made great progress still they have not become strong enough to think and live independently, completely from the shadow of men. In fact Devi coexists with her brother and it is this oneness with Shivraj that makes her suppress her desire to marry Michael not only before the death of Shivraj but also after his death. She herself admits; 'May be he was the inside and I was the outside of the same person'.<sup>8</sup> Another leading character of this novel is Madhu, through whose character the novelist exposes the tyrannical nature of our male dominated society under which a woman has to struggle hard for her identity or getting a place for herself. Madhu's story is the story of a girl whose very existence is crushed by the traditional society simply because she has become a victim of male lust. Sahgal reveals very minutely through Madhu that this male-dominated society allows men to get away scot-free while the women are punished for a crime they have not committed. Ironically tormentors are not punished, but the victim is tortured every moment, not only at the hands of society but also the members of her own family. Even they do not allow her to shed tears, to complain and to appeal against her persecutors. Even parents who are considered, in Hindu religion to be on the same level as 'God' do not bother about her mental agony. They are more concerned about hiding the stigma from the society so that the prospects of a good bridegroom is not tarnished. Madhu could get away from the outside forces, but not from her own people who oppress her more than the rapists. They (the rapists) wounded her only once but her own people wound her daily by rubbing salt on wounds. Marcia P. Liu in her article "Continuity and Development in the Novels of Nayantara Sahgal" writes: Clearly Sahgal has very strong feeling about the wastage of young lives, especially women's lives.

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