

FROM SILENCE TO SPEECH: AN ASSESSMENT OF NAYANTARA SEHGAL'S NOVELS WITH A FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

Feminism has become so far the most celebrated term yet in plight of the right meaning of it. In general it can be seen as collective and individual effort on the part of women at different times and in different countries to seek for equality of rights and opportunities in all walks of life. Nayantara Sahgal has been popularly acknowledged as a political writer. She has earned her reputation on the literary scene both as a creative writer and a political columnist. Her works has a strong realistic platform and reflects not only her personal values but also the changing values of a society exposed for both freedom and power. But besides politics, Sahgal's fiction focuses attention on Indian woman's search for sexual freedom and self-realization. Almost in all her novels, Sahgal has gone deep into the female psyche. She has explored the nature and scope of the trauma of women breed. Suffering and loneliness have mellowed Sahgal and she has been able to transform these into understanding and compassion. She believes that the potentialities in women are not exploited to the full. Sahgal's female characters are individuals who can remain independent within the framework of society into which they were born. She is able to go deep into the mindset of her female characters and analyze them with sympathy and understanding. Sahgal has pictured women's sufferings without sentimentality and with such distinctness that she may well be described as "the anatomist of the feminine psyche." In most of her novels, Sahgal figures women who prophet a new morality — a morality not grounded to physical chastity. It demands compliance of individual longings for self-fulfilment and chases consideration not just for the reality but for the heart and feeling.

Keywords: *Feminism, Nayantara Sahgal, self-fulfilment...*

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Feminism has become so far the most celebrated term yet in plight of the right meaning of it. In general it can be seen as collective and individual effort on the part of women at different times and in different countries to seek for equality of rights and opportunities in all walks of life.

Nayantara Sahgal has been popularly acknowledged as a political writer. She has earned her reputation on the literary scene both as a creative writer and a political columnist. Her works has a strong realistic platform and reflects not only her personal values but also the changing values of a society exposed for both freedom and power. But besides politics, Sahgal's fiction focuses attention on Indian woman's search for sexual freedom and self-realization. Almost in all her novels, Sahgal has gone deep into the female psyche. She has explored the nature and scope of the trauma of women breed. Suffering and loneliness have mellowed Sahgal and she has been able to transform these into understanding and compassion. She believes that the potentialities in women are not exploited to the full. Sahgal's female characters are individuals who can remain independent within the framework of society into which they were born. She is able to go deep into the mindset of her female characters and analyze them with sympathy and understanding. Sahgal has pictured women's sufferings without sentimentality and with such distinctness that she may well be described as "the anatomist of the feminine psyche." In most of her novels, Sahgal figures women who prophet a new morality — a morality not grounded to physical chastity. It demands compliance of individual longings for self-fulfilment and chases consideration not just for the reality but for the heart and feeling. As Shyam Ansari observes,

"Her concept of free woman transcends the limits of economic or social freedom and becomes a mental or emotional attitude."

The concept of freedom constitutes to be the central concern of the novelist in her novels. Her protagonists so deeply and loyally rooted in Indian culture are portrayed to be struggling for freedom and trying to assert their individuality in their own way. Sahgal tries to portray the sensibility of woman: how a woman looks out at herself and her problems. She feels that woman should try to understand and realize herself as a human being and not just as an appendage to some male life. In her novels women represent different kinds of virtues. They do not suffer but maintain their position. Sahgal represents new morality, according to which woman is not to be

taken as a mere toy, an object of lust and momentary pleasure, but man's equal and honoured partner. All the novels of Sahgal talk about women who are oppressed by marriage, by political circumstances, by accidents of history. Most of her female characters have extra-marital relationship with one or more than one person. Her women are victims of a conventional society which does not permit women to assert their rights pertaining to their individual freedom and considers the very issue of identity-crisis as preposterous apropos women.

Storm in Chandigarh presents a burning challenge against the denial of freedom and identity to woman. The female characters in *Storm in Chandigarh* wriggle out of the strait-jacket of virtuous stereotype, and emerge as individuals. This is brought out clearly in the portrayal of far from ideal marriages of three young couples — Vishal-Leela, Inder-Saroj and Jit-Mara. Sahgal is deeply concerned with unhappy marriages and the loneliness of living. The novel is a study of certain similarities and contrasts of various characters. It portrays the young hearts broken up by compulsions of matrimony and call of newfound love. The first couple we are introduced is Saroj and Inder. Saroj who has been brought up in the liberal atmosphere of freedom, expects equality in marriage. She is greatly surprised by her husband's violent reactions to a pre-marital affair she had had in her college days. Her pre-marital relationship becomes the cause of failure of their marriage. Inder is obsessed and could not forgive this act of Saroj and constantly exploits her sense of innocence. Saroj longs for friendship, tenderness and frankness from Inder, but since her jealous, unreasonable husband never bothers to understand her needs, she finds that solace in Vishal. Saroj's quest for communication and sharing naturally leads her towards Vishal, whom she finds more understanding and considerate. She frankly tells Vishal:

Half the time one is afraid — you know — saying wrong thing or of being misunderstood — just for being oneself and being punished for it. So one spends such a lot of time, acting, or at least hiding, and that's very tiring.”

Ironically, Inder is torturing his wife for having pre-marital relationship once only, while he had no explanation to offer for his own extra-marital relationship with another man's wife. It exposes the open practice of double standards in our society. Saroj learns the value of freedom from Vishal Dubey during their lonely walks:

“life, Dubey told her, was bigger than any system. Life could remould or break the system that lacked righteousness and reason. It was life's precious obligation to rebel, and humanity's right to be free, to choose from the best light it could see, not necessarily the long-accepted light.”

When Inder forbids her to meet Vishal, she refuses to listen to him. At this stage, she rebels, and when she understands the truth of failure of her marriage, she decides to walk out of her rotten, conventional confinement, with all the children to live a life of her own. Saroj's departure is a

move towards personal freedom and a rejection of the role Inder has wanted to thrust on her, Vishal tells:

“It has taken a million years of evolution for a person and his cherished individuality to matter and no terror must be allowed to destroy that,”

And finally Saroj overcomes her initial hesitations and comes out of her husband's home. Vishal takes the final decision for her. He helps her and sets her free from the burden of guilt. She remembers Vishal's words to her,

“Vishal was right. There was only one way to live, without pretence. It would be the ultimate healing balm to the lonely spaces of the spirit, beyond which there would be no darkness.”

Another couple is Jit and Mara who also suffer from a similar confusion. They are a childless couple who faces emotional void in their life. Mara suffers from an acute sense of emptiness in life. Jeet is very sweet tempered and considerate but here Mara's problem is not physical but psychological. The search for communication makes Mara come towards Inder. The privacy of her thoughts is ruptured with the arrival of Inder who has developed a distinct intimacy with her. Mara is not gratified with the gentleness of her husband but desires all that the world can offer her — the softness of Jit and the hardness of Inder. Mara is capable of responding to Inder's needs which intensifies her inability to respond to Jit's much simpler needs. Mara's lack of interest makes Jit feel that all his affection and care are wasted on her:

“Back to the caves, she had said, and that was what would suit her best. You gave a woman the perfection of which you were capable; the finest flower of your most evolved instincts, and it was a waste.... She didn't want to be cherished and affection made no impression on her”

It does not mean that Mara lusted after brute force nor does it suggest that she is forced into submission by Inder. Soon she is disillusioned when she finds him a hypocrite, and breaks all relations with him. By that time, Jit also realizes that there is something lacking in their relationship and makes an attempt to come closer to her. Jit helped Mara in coming out of the emotional jungle by talking to her of an unhappy experience of his own. The realization makes them be reconciled and remain true to each other. One of the major symbols that derive out of the personal predicament of the victims is that of the 'Cave' which stands for all hypocrisy, pretence and non communicability.

The third couple in this novel of Vishal Dubey and Leela's marriage is also a fleeting search for communication. Vishal who wants to build a relationship on truth finds it a difficult task. In his relationship with Leela, he felt a great deal of unhappiness. Despite her extra-marital

affair with Hari, Leela insisted on keeping the facade of a stable marriage with Vishal. She had always lived a life of pretence and hypocrisy. He realized the torture of living together intimately yet remained strangers to each other.

After bearing the tortures of remorse with which his relationship with Leela abruptly ended due to her death. Then Vishal strays accidentally into the region of Gauri's natural, luxuriously feminine generosity. Dubey's relationship with Gauri is based on sex and the urgency of a momentary need. She makes no emotional demands on him. His affair with her began in the disturbed year after Leela's death. Gauri feels secure in her marriage. She feels satisfied with her successful industrialist husband Nikhil Ray. She has no pretensions about her virtuosity; she calls herself a

“social butterfly with positively no interest in life beyond my own comforts and pleasures.”

Sahgal is deeply concerned with unhappy marriages and the loneliness of living. The novel portrays certain similarities and contrasts of various characters. Women characters in this novel do not like to remain confined within the four walls of their houses. Through the portrayal of Leela, Gauri, Saroj and Mara, the author holds a mirror to the society that subjects its women to worst type of inhuman exploitation.

Mistaken Identity has innumerable references to the miserable plight of women in those days. It portrays the sensibility of woman, how a woman looks out at herself and her problems. There are four major women characters in this novel, Sylla, a parsee girl, Willie May, an American girl, Razia the Muslim girl whom the narrator loves, and the mother of the narrator. Sylla and Willie May are liberated women even by Western standards. Sylla is a highly fashionable girl who wears frocks, swims in swimming costumes, has bobbed hair and enjoys informal relationships with Bhushan. Bhushan, in fact was in favour of marrying Sylla but it was she who out rightly rejected the proposal.

“I think she understood as soon as she met me that I was a man just off an operating table and the anesthetic hadn't worn off. When it did she didn't like what she saw”

The second woman we meet is submissive yet rebel. The Ranee of Vijaygarh eludes all moulds and definitions. She is Bhushan Singh's mother and is another fine example of a conservative woman. She is a class apart. She is a religious woman and makes pilgrimages to a number of places to have a son and takes good care of him after his birth. Bhushan Singh too is devoted to his mother but his father neglects her for his younger queen. She married at the age of five, brought to her husband's home at thirteen, had to wait for nine long years to be blessed with a son. She belongs to an age when women were expected to stay behind veil. She remains

completely detached and isolated in her family mansion. She faces a very subtle and inhuman form of exploitation. She is uneducated, rather illiterate, has an apathetic husband, has nothing to look forward to, and yet she dares to shun her husband from her life, when she discovers the man has no respect for her kind. There is no one to support her in her crusade against female exploitation and yet she dares to challenge the authority of her husband in his own home. The woman behind the veil breaks all ties with her husband, when he marries for the third time. She in the end marries Yusuf out of her sexual frustration. She breaks all boundaries and makes her own rules. In fact, her free spirit, her strong will, submitted to the demands of neither her husband nor the world. When in the end she breaks free from all preventions and marries comrade Yusuf, it is without any infesting sense of guilt that she does so. Her marriage to Yusuf is not an effort to seek refuge from the evils that Raja has subjected to her. Such refuge, she does not ask for. She does not get support even from her son Bhushan. But she never questions him for it. She herself walks proudly by shunning all the subjugations and tortures of life. Ranees marks the culmination of the onward march of Sahgal's new woman towards freedom.

Through Bhushan's narrative, the novelist examines how each of the three women relates to their social background. The second woman that comes in the life of Bhushan is Sylla. Sylla is free-spirited, assertive, flamboyant and a typical independent inhabitant of upper class Bombay. She is a modern girl who is full of enthusiasm. Just like Bhushan's mother, Sylla also proves herself to be an influence in his life. Sylla has no redundancy in her. She is presented as a young Parsee woman with a westernized outlook. Bhushan says:

"I was Sylla's (mistress). I was more feminine, more gentle and compliant than her. I was the one who waited at home for her visits. She came when she wanted to... I was the one who loved to linger, loved to perform small services for her..."

Being free spirited she loves to flirt with Bhushan without being emotionally attached. She is not even interested in getting married. Sylla is unable to understand him at two fronts – his obsession with Razia and his support for Hindu – Muslim unity. Finally, avoiding emotionalism and being a realist, Sylla decides that she cannot commit herself for ever to Bhushan.

Sylla who was educated in England and Switzerland and she was brought up by her grandmother who had herself been educated in France. This lady had singlehandedly raised Sylla to be a free-spirited and independent woman. As a result of her upbringing, Sylla is a straightforward woman. Even Sylla's appearance, her very English ways, set her apart from the common Indian woman. Sylla tries to rescue Bhushan out of the Hindu-Muslim love-madness. But she could not heal up the wound or cure Bhushan. They did not want anything, no flirting with the idea of marriage. During Bhushan's three years in jail, while Sylla had kindly provided him with a good lawyer, she had also had the time and the perspective to see that Bhushan is not a man with whom she can spend rest of her life. After coming out of prison Bhushan wants to

marry Sylla but Sylla plans to marry Nauzer, the Parsee young rising star, the advocate, perhaps because Nauzer could give her what her grandmother had hoped for her.

When Bhushan is in America he meets another woman Willy May. She too is attracted towards him for his oriental looks. Like Sylla, she, too, is upset with his obsession for Razia. With her, Bhushan shares a delightful, purely sexual relationship. The novelist herself describes their relationship:

“she teaches him to drink cocktails out of a teacup during prohibition in his US and to do the Bunny Hug, the Turkey Tort and all the other fashionable ballroom dances. This relationship has a beginning and an end.”

She is outspoken, western girl who openly declares her views on the topic of sex that “everybody needs sex. Sex is good for you. We’d go crazy if we didn’t get enough of it.” but she too is not in a serious relationship with Bhushan. Willie fantasizes being loved by a courageous hero or some caveman. The moment she comes in contact with a man of her choice, she runs, without delaying, off to marry him.

To the very last of the novel Bhushan met the young daughter of Yusuf Maya, and marries her. He finally finds fulfilment in his marriage to comrade Yusuf’s daughter. We cannot help noticing that all the women in the novel appear to hold on to a distinct vision of life. When opportunity comes their way, none of them settles for anything less than the best that their world has to offer. Sahgal appears to be treading in new and perhaps intense areas of experience, confronting with fresh insights and lyrical contents of human life. The novelist, with minute precision and utmost care, depicts the troubled and complex psychological mental make-up of all three women. She moves backwards and forwards in time, to create the plight and struggle of women in her novel. The novel weaves a beautiful, realistic and convincing fabric of a life and struggles of women in those times. Raneer, Sylla and Razia are the ones who emerge out sensible modern women because of their interpersonal relationships. Once they meet the right partners of their respective lives, they get a ray of life and hope out of their listless and drab life. They are portrayed with different individuality and presence of throb of life in their hearts without confining to futile social and cultural imposition. Their women characters especially only after they have gone through their own experiences, come to their real self. They also revolt against the traditional image of Indian women in words and deeds, be it in business or sexual spheres. In a sense she is the forerunner of the emerging Indian women with their liberated womanhood.

The novelist puts forth the modern view of living where women should be given full freedom to express their individuality and escape from suffering and injustice. She feels that woman should try to understand and realize herself as a human being and not just as an appendage to some male life. Her women represent different kinds of virtues. They do not suffer but maintain their position. Her women from Maya to the mother figure Raneer rise against the

stultifying culture which retards women's progress and rebel against all attempts to elide women's pivotal role in the family and society. Sahgal's novels deal with men and women in eternal search for freedom-freedom to express themselves, freedom to be their own selves. Sahgal feels strongly about female exploitation and male sarcasm towards the issue of women's identity crises. She demands social justice for women, her focus being on freedom. As woman has been suppressed since time immemorial, she is in need of sympathy, support, encouragement and inspiration for the full blossoming of her character and in the novels of Sahgal, the woman protagonist receives them from a man.

In her fictional depiction of women attempting to free themselves from repressive relationships, Sahgal is more direct in her feminist sympathies than the other writers. She makes a systematic and sustained effort to demolish deeply ingrained attitudes regarding women, before indicating ways in which a new image can be formulated. She is one of the important women novelists who depicts post-colonial attitudes and vouches for a new feminine morality and a new humanism in her novels. As a woman novelist, Sahgal recognizes that her primary obligation is that of advocating the emancipation of women. Sahgal in her novels vividly describes how woman is exploited even during the modern times by both the individuals and the society. Sahgal also traces out a slow and gradual deviation from the stereotype of the virtuous woman to redefine virtue. Sahgal condemns self-immolation and suffering, and points out that the virtue of the modern woman is

“courage which is a willingness to risk the unknown and to face the consequences. They are strivers and aspirers, toward freedom, toward goodness, toward a compassionate world. Their virtue is a quality of heart and mind and spirit, a kind of untouched innocence and integrity.”

Sahgal's world consists of two types of women characters. The first group consists of women who are happy in the confines of Hindu orthodoxy, and the other of those with a strong sense of individuality and an analytical mind but shuttling between traditional and modern values. Her women are not career women treating men as their rivals in a highly competitive society. Rather they wish to relate themselves to the people around them; they would like to be treated as equals. In her novels, Sahgal reveals how before marriage women are brought up strictly according to the traditional codes. The moment a girl reaches adolescence, she is reminded of her femininity. The double standards and dichotomous attitude which continue to operate throughout a woman's life start right in her parents' home. She is prevented from developing her individuality. The traditional feminine virtues and graces are instilled in her so that she could be an attractive commodity in the marriage market. She gets hardly any encouragement to develop her independent individual self. She is always put aside at the time of taking any decision even about her career. In short, Nayantara Sahgal's women are of the view that they should move with the time and they should not compromise with the issue of their

individual freedom in our male-dominated society. The feminist in Sahgal always insists on women's equality at par with men.

Freedom for Sahgal means a mental or emotional attitude transcending economic or social aspects. She exhorts women to develop a sense of awareness as individuals stubbornly refusing to tolerate injustice in any form. A woman should not be according to her partial to man. For her, sexual awakening alone, however, does not help to achieve selfhood, though sexuality, implying wholehearted participation in life, is an important ingredient. Sahgal is sensible enough to understand that equality of sexes is not to be achieved through antagonism or violence. Society consists of men and women and happiness in life is achieved through understanding, cooperation, and sympathy from both sides. Men should come forward in a large measure to compensate for the shortcomings perpetrated and maintained for centuries. This sympathetic understanding on the part of responsible men in society is what she calls

"oxygen of understanding" which could relieve the women suffocating under unreasonable and partial codes of conduct. The atmosphere where sympathy, understanding and friendship prevail and where there is no necessity for 'pretence' to keep up the expected standard of behaviour is what she calls "new humanism"

According to Sahgal, "new morality" is significantly different from the concept of morality as ordinarily understood. For her new morality means codes of conduct on sex chastity equally applicable to men and women. Sahgal speaks of another morality, a "higher morality", which transcends beyond the narrow confines of sex, a morality that guides man to act on principles of justice, honour and integrity.

To conclude, Nayantara Sahgal has presented subjugated women who suffered due to the sexist and gender bias in the patriarchal society which gives a subordinate position to women and also treats them as second-rate people. But once the realization of being treated ill flutters in the mind of her women they struggle to break the barriers and cast new morality of new woman. Sahgal envisions a world which is based on equality, sharing the functions; the virtues of women are equally valued with those of men.

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