

**RELATIONSHIP, FREEDOM AND TURMOILS IN  
THE NOVELS OF NAYANTARA SAHGAL**

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**Abstract**

*Nayantara Sahgal one of the most significant voices among women writers in the contemporary Indian writing in English. Sahgal in her novels vividly describes how woman is in search of sexual freedom and ultimately find in complications due to their quest of it in marital and extra-marital relationships. 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 to build courage to live the life full of freedom and identical. Keywords: Marital, extra-marital relationship, freedom, individuality, patriarchy, conventional*

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## RELATIONSHIP FREEDOM AND TURMOILS IN THE NOVELS OF NAYANTARA SAHGAL

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During 1950's, Nayantara Sahgal emerged as one of the most significant voices among women writers in the contemporary Indian writing in English. Nayantara Sahgal is a prolific writer who has eight novels to her credit, two biographies, two political commentaries and a large number of articles in various newspapers and magazines. She is a recipient of the prestigious 'Sahitya Akademi Award' for her novel *Rich Like Us* (1985), the 'Sinclair Award' and the 'Common Wealth Award for Eurasia' for her novel *Plans For Departure* (1986). Her fiction is closely interwoven with the fabric of interpersonal relationships set in the political and social milieu of India. Various dimensions of human relationships, man-woman particularly are the main thesis, we do find in all her novels. Man-Woman relationship holds a vital place in these relationships and the novelist deals with this dimension of relationship with full concern and broad perspective.

In Sahgal's *A Time to be Happy* (1958), Maya is not comfortable in her relation with her husband. Maya tries to submerge her unhappiness and dissatisfaction in social work and religion. Sahgal is deeply concerned with the failure of marital relationships and the loneliness of living. Maya experiences loneliness, frustration and complains of marriage. Maya and her husband are unable to understand each other, which result into lack of communication. Her husband never thinks the female psyche and the emotional need of Maya. Instead he demands Maya should be the traditional woman as meek, submissive and the mere shadow of her man. Lack of communication between Maya and her husband lead her in emotional isolation in marriage life. Maya is not much ambitious and not she desired much in their relation. What she wants is just some kind of response, recognition of her existence in her own house:

"Not a good one or an approving one, necessarily, just a response

of any kind. Even when we live or die is not important unless it is important to someone.”(Sahgal, ATH, 35)

Maya is a silent victim at the altar of marriage and her male counterparts. Sahgal’s women characters suffer by the social dogma, which is against the women and promotes the patriarchal system.

In *A Time to be Happy*, Maya and Ammaji suffer because they are unable to accept the relations with males of family submissively. Ammaji and Maya are the representatives of the older generation and the transition period respectively. Sahgal shows her acute awareness of the dependent status of women on male in society. She is aware of the confining role of marriage as an institution for women. *A Time to be Happy* explores women’s search for individuality both within marriage as equal partners and without it as individual. For Maya, marriage was doomed from the beginning, chiefly on account of the antithetical personalities of her husband and herself:

“She had the cool purity of the eucalyptus, as compared with his extravagant gulmohur. She was the mirror-smooth lake to his rushing waterfall.”(ATH, 42)

Maya remains frustrated in her relations with her husband, and ultimately their marriage becomes a sterile marriage, leaving them dry. The narrator’s description of her as a slab of marble as ‘marble in difference’ is significant. What she considers the most important thing in life, is the emotional response which she is unable to receive from her husband. However, she receives it from the narrator. Maya is represented in contrast to the traditional ideal women. The narrator’s mother supports her husband in all his views and enterprises. Like any true Hindu woman, she believes that “*his concern was with God and hers with God in him.*”(153) Lakshmi and Govind Narayan are the representatives of happy Hindu married couple. They are happy and always busy in domestic work and traditional rituals altogether. Both husband and wife are generous and sympathetic to each other and seem ready to sacrifice for other. In their smoothly run household one seldom heard the voices of the servants and the crying of the baby. Laxmi always needed her

husband and never does anything without him. Laxmi is thinks her own house as her own and devotedly working for it. Savitri, Kusum's mother, like a true Hindu woman, regularly observed fasts and offered prayers at five every morning for the well-being of her family generally and her husband particularly. The concentration on the traditional woman by Sahgal therefore serves to reveal the second vital function of Maya in the novel.

In *This Time of Morning* (1965), Uma and Leela, the prominent women characters play vital modern multidimensional roles while establishing relations with others in both traditional and modern ways. Recklessly these women search for freedom, using men as tools, but succeed only in harming themselves. Celia, Barbara and Nita, in their ultimate dependence on Kalyan betray the failure of their search for identity. Nearly all women characters in this novel are unable to create positive and faithful relation with male characters of their own and other too. In the character of Nita, Sahgal explores the relationship of daughter- father. While delineating father –daughter relationship, the novelist has remarkably highlighted the male dominations and socio- cultural system regarding the women and their secondary place in the society. Nita is the young, beautiful daughter of Dr. Narang, who is a queer blend of Eastern and Western culture. Western life-style is a part of Narang's culture but when it comes to his daughter, he would act in the most traditional manner, imposing severe restrictions on the movement of his ambitious daughter. Narang family never allows their daughter to parties. As Mrs. Narang puts it, *"We don't allow Nita to go out alone. Her father would not hear of it."*(Sahgal, TTM, 30)

Narang's concern for the safety and protection of their daughter exemplifies their conformity to traditional values. Nita's parents would not allow their daughter to smoke, to have drinks or attend club dances till she is married. Nita's parents want to settle down their daughter in marriage and wash their hands of her. They do not give any importance to the wishes of their daughter and force her to marry the man of their choice. Although she is twenty-three, she does not want to marry at all because the *"creatures her parents have in mind for her are either so awful or midgets or men who never open their*

mouth.”(TTM, 32) Nita feels utterly unhappy and a sense of uneasiness overpowers her when she learns about her parent’s decision to marry her off to a stranger. Finally, she agrees to her parents’ choice of Vijay as groom. Nita and Vijay also remain unsuccessful in married life. Nita intends to have lovable, sympathetic and kind life partner, but Vijay behaves with her as a master and treats her as his property to be ruled according to his wish. Nita is fully aware that Vijay views her as a possession not as an individual, and this kind of marriage has no prospects of fulfillment. Nita desires to live her own life and discover the needs of her body, rejecting the values and ideas of the previous generation thrust upon her. In search of herself and freedom to get rid from the clutches of her husband, she rejects the so called anti-woman traditional values. She offers herself to the irresistible Kalyan, the man of her choice. She finds a strange comfort in his company and visits him frequently while decorating his drawing room. Once she directly refuses to go home and frankly expresses her love for Kalyan: “*But don’t make me go.....Don’t make me go, please don’t make me go*” (152). He took her to his room. Instead of caring as a married and relation with her husband, Nita finds extra martial relationship with Kalyan more secure and comfortable, and necessary to fulfill her emotional hunger for life. When Kalyan asks her the reason for her frequent visits, she answers:

“I’ve thought about that so often.... Every time I came I wondered why. I used to think about it getting into the taxi and every minute the taxi took to come here, and all the while I was here. I didn’t know why I came. I only knew I would die if I didn’t.... Because I wanted to and it’s the only thing I’ve ever really wanted to do” (223).

Nita’s pre-marital relationship with Kalyan is the result of an attempt to fulfill her inner desire for love, emotionally supporter and communication.

Uma and ArjunMitra is another couple to unable to establish the happy and faithful relationship with each other. Like other women characters, Uma is also ambitious and unable to bear the male dominance and tries to have her own identity and freedom. Young and beautiful Uma is married to Arjun

Mitra, a man much older than her. Uma feels extremely bored with her futile marriage and continually seeks to escape into the fakery of sexual freedom. ArjunMitra feels ashamed and frustrated but silently shields and suffers his wife. He forgets that in Uma “marriage had released a torrent of hungry sensuousness that brought to starling focus her exotic feline beauty” (26). Uma longs for his love and company, but Arjun “*Condemned himself to an isolation where she could never reach or touch him again.*”(28)

His indifferent behavior and isolated nature makes her so frustrate emotionally and sexually that she starts to drink and move alone with men, deviating from the social norms. Uma lacks in her marriage to ArjunMitra leads her to establish her relationship with Neil. On several occasions during official parties, Uma disappears with any man who flirts with her a little to satisfy her physical thirsts. Once Arjun finds, “*Neil’s tie on a chair, his shirt sleeves, the faint smear of lipstick on his mouth.... For here he was forced to be the witness to her unspeakable behaviour.*”(166) The scene speaks of the frustration and dissatisfaction in Uma’s life. Sahgal herself says that through Uma’s character she wants to say that a

“woman is not allowed to be a woman in orthodox thinking. She has to be ‘good’ and good means virtuous in the sense of chaste. Uma was a woman with appetites that her husband couldn’t satisfy, so she indulged them elsewhere. Men do it, and there’s no comment.”(Arora, 70)

In this novel, Rashmi and Dalip, the married couple seems unable to establish healthy marital relationship between them. Dalip, the traditional husband is not able to give freedom and recognition to his wife within house. And ultimately Rashmi becomes a victim of wrong marriage but unlike Maya and Kusum she does not confine herself to the cult of domesticity assigned to a 'virtuous woman' rather she seeks separation from her husband to fully realize her identity as a human being. She was married to Dalip, at the age of six.

The novelist keeps the circumstances of their marriage and the factors responsible for converting the marriage into failure in the background of the

novel. The marital ties are not dissolved; the formal divorce is not affected but Rashmi shows moral courage and takes a quick decision to go to her parents to evade the existing situation of suffering loneliness and incompatibility. In Delhi also, she continues her relations with Dalip. The impact of the failure of marriage on her sensibility causes an emotional vacuum; life becomes a mechanical affair having no warmth of love. She has nourished no ill will against Dalip, perhaps she is well aware of her weakness as a woman, but the quarrels between them separate them forever. Rashmi never hated her husband, but the emotional emptiness between them haunts her. Even though she is angry with Dalip due to his negligence about their relations as a husband-wife, but she don't want to harm him. Dalip and Rashmi are sure about their inability to establish their relationship properly.

The sufferings which Rashmi experience during this unhappy phase of marriage have taught her the value of endurance and preservation of life at any cost. She is so changed by marriage that her friend Rakesh also finds her that she looks a great sufferer. Rakesh at once apprehends, 'something was missing', however, concludes that it is the marriage that sealed her fate.

Rashmi's meeting with Rakesh and their relation give somewhat rescue from the frustration of her martial hallow relationship. She is suffused with new hopes and gains confidence which she had lost in marriage ending in disaster.

Rashmi is slowly grouping her way back to a life of emotional stability and normalcy and thus she finds comfort first in the company of Rakesh, her childhood friend and playmate and then she turns to Neil Berensen, the chief architect of Gandhi Peace Institute to have a short affair to give free expression to her individuality.

Rashmi – Neil Berensen's relationship episode constitutes an important part in the novel. Though, Neil is a foreigner but they come close and share some kind of communication. We find equality, love and full of understanding in their relationship. There is a free play of emotions. During one of Rashmi's visit to the site of the Peace Institute the intimacy between the two develops to

the extent of emotional involvement. Neil is to get the maximum out of his relationship with Rashmi and that is why he puts a personal question pertaining to her marital affairs which it now no more obscure to him. Rashmi tells him her previous married relationship and the separation. Neil's observation about the concept of happiness and marriage being two separate things is characteristically a bourgeois outlook on man-woman relationship, suggesting that one should not let one's happiness be over-shadowed by marital discord.

Rashmi's relationship with Neil restores her faith in the healing power of love and friendship. She broods over the existing predicament the universe looks to be emptied of sensation. She is scarcely aware of her identity and therefore she resolves to start her life a new finally dissolving her marital ties. Rashmi thinks man-woman relations in marriage or outside can be made happy if the two sustain faith in each-other's integrity and uphold the value of love and harmony.

Another extra martial relationship of Rashmi and Neil highlighted by the novelist also is the product of unsuccessful married relationship between husband-wife, Dalip and Rashmi respectively, due to lack of understanding and prejudice against each other. Rashmi's divorce and her extra-marital relationship with Neil is not mistake of couple but an inner urge for communication and emotional involvement of the self. Marriage makes Rashmi "*a moth trapped in cement.*"(Sahgal, TTM, 35) Rashmi returns home when she feels frustrated in her marriage life. She is in a state of confusion, whether to discuss her problems with her parents or to seek a divorce. She becomes guilt-ridden, and wonders if she had played her role as a wife worthily. The only thought that occurs to her at this juncture is that of love, and a desire for one person with whom she may live till the end of life. At this critical time, she come across Neil and started to love with him. Not parents, but Neil gives her comfort and security and assurance of comfort. In his company that she finally summons the courage to shake off the pretence of conventionality and announces her separation from her husband. Now she feels herself released from the tension and completely free from her bondage to Dalip, her husband.



She becomes emotionally involved with Neil who makes her feel alive after a long period of senselessness or numbness. Rashmi's decision to separate from her husband becomes a mortal blow to all that her mother Mira held sacred bond:

“What reason under heaven could sever the marriage bond? Women stayed married, had since time immemorial stayed married, under every conceivable circumstance, to brutal insensitive husbands, to lunatics and lepers.... Fulfilment had lain in service and sacrifice. If there was suffering, too, it was part of life” (Sahgal, TTM, 149).

Rashmi is not contented with the superficial acquaintance of Neil. She wants to know all the details about him, about his divorced wife Martha and about his children. She desires mutual involvement and not the demanding relationship that exists in India between man and woman. Rashmi desires to explore Neil's life — the past, the present — its joy and despair but her desire is not comprehended by Neil. She grows into an awareness of what she desires during her relationship with Neil.

Sahgal's intentionally delineated the man-woman relationships with various dimensions. Some relationships are happy and cherishing the conventional values without taking forefront the injustice and cruelty of Hindu orthodoxy to women particularly. While delineating the marital and extra-marital relationships of her female characters, the novelist vividly focuses on the urge of freedom of her characters and due to their ambitious nature these characters find in turmoil and resulted into suffering and isolation. In her novels, Sahgal reveals the changes in relations with women before and after marriage. In short, NayantaraSahgal'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. While delineating the relations, the novelist has given the soft corner to women and has considered the women as the victim and man is responsible for her degradation. Woman

suffers not only by man's act of physical violence, but she is too often emotionally hurt and crippled through his arrogance, cynicism and indifference.

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