

Gender in the Novels of Sahgal

Parkashvir*

Research Scholar, Singhanian University, Pachari Bari, Rajasthan

Abstract – The first generation of important women writers began publishing their works in the 1950s. Ruth Praver Jhabvala, Kamala Markandaya, Santha Rama Rau, Nayantara Sahgal were all active on the literary scene. During this period, Nayantara Sahgal emerged as one of the most significant voices in the realm of Indian English fiction. Fiction by women writers constitutes a major segment of the contemporary Indian writing in English. Many of the Indian women novelists focus on women's issues, they have a women's perspective on the world.

-----X-----

INTRODUCTION

Women novelists writing in English attempt to project woman as the central figure and seem to succeed in presenting the predicament of women most effectively. Their instinctive perception of and insight into women's reactions and responses, problems and perplexities, the complex working of their inner selves, their emotional involvements and disturbances help them in portraying a life-size picture of the contemporary woman with all her longings and aspirations, hopes and frustrations. The emotional world of women is explored and analyzed with admirable insight and sympathetic perception by the women novelists. With insight and understanding, women writers in English present the dilemma which modern women are facing in recent times. Women who are conscious of their emotional needs and strive for self-fulfillment rejecting the existing traditions and social set-up and long for a more liberal and unconventional way of life find their place in the novels of Nayantara Sahgal. Her novels portray women trampled and oppressed because of their dependence upon men and the harrowing experience they have to face in their struggle to come out of the bondage and stand on their own feet. The hardship and suffering involved in fighting against an established order, the shattering experience of divorce and the resultant alienation between parents and children form the thematic concern of Sahgal's novels. Almost in all the eight novels, Sahgal has gone deep into the female psyche. In novel after novel, she explores the nature and scope of the trauma of women folk. 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 psyche of her female characters and study them with sympathy and understanding. Sahgal has

portrayed women's sufferings without sentimentality and with such vividness that she may well be described as "the anatomist of the feminine psyche."¹ Husband-wife alienation resulting from lack of communication, East-West encounter, extra-marital relationship, existentialist problems and temperamental incompatibility form the major themes in Sahgal's novels. In most of her novels, Sahgal portrays women who herald a new morality — a morality not confined to physical chastity. It demands accommodation of individual longings for self-fulfillment and seeks consideration not for just the deed but for the heart and feeling. As Shyam Asnani observes, "Her concept of free woman transcends the limits of economic or social freedom and becomes a mental or emotional attitude."² 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 honored 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.

All the novels of Sahgal from *A Time to be Happy* to *Mistaken Identity* show her deep concern with the

parlous state of women in the parochial society. Though Sahgal has carved a niche for herself chiefly as a political novelist, her feminist concern is quite obvious and her fighter spirit quite vocal in her fiction. Sahgal's concern for women, however, is that of a humanist more than it is of a feminist. Woman suffers not only by man's act of physical violence, but she is often emotionally hurt and crippled through his arrogance, cynicism and indifference. Loneliness, suffering and frustration in marriage sometimes cause disintegration and make women rebellious. It is not physical loneliness that Sahgal talks of, but deeper emotional and spiritual voids created by egoism. In her essay "Women: Persons or Possessions", Sahgal condemns such attitudes which value women as property and discourage individuality in them: When I heard someone remark "we never allow our daughter to go out" or "I can't do that, my husband would not like it", it sounded a very peculiar, alien jargon. As if, I thought, women were property, not persons".³ In a traditional society when a girl reaches in her maturity, her movements are restricted, whereas at the same age there are no restrictions for her brothers. The girls are always advised to confine indoors on the other hand boys are encouraged to develop outdoor activities. A spirit of competition, exploration and challenge is inculcated among boys, and they are taught to assert their supremacy over the world in general. Girls, on the contrary, are discouraged from showing aggressive modes of behaviour and, instead, feminine virtues of grace, modesty and self-effacement are frequently demanded from them. Sahgal shows women suffering in marriage-life and then deciding to come out of the suffocating bondage by preferring for divorce. She depicts her women deciding to prefer for divorce rather than live a stifling life of injustice and agony. Her women like Saroj, Simrit, Rashmi and Anna all leave their husbands or break the marriage which does not allow them to be free and to live life in their own way. She represents that through divorce they will be free from the suffering and agony of an unhappy or unjust relationship it does not solve the problems and women have to continue to struggle and suffer on various levels — economic, emotional and psychological. Women who feel frustrated either because of marital disharmony or loneliness in life is shown to indulge in social or religious activities. For example, Maya in Sahgal's *A Time to be Happy* is a woman who 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; hence, most of her women remarry. Most of her couples seem to be happy and contented, but they often experience loneliness and complain of silences in marriage, as Maya appears incapable of emotion, but this lack of communication is the result of her emotional isolation in marriage. What she wants is just some kind of response, recognition of her existence: "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."⁴ Maya's childlessness is a symbol, not a cause of her unhappiness. Maya is a silent victim at the altar of marriage. Sahgal's women characters suffer because they refuse to submerge their individuality and cling to their personal identity at all costs. In *A Time to be Happy*, Maya and Ammaji suffer because they refuse to lose their identity. Ammaji is a representative of the older generation whereas Maya belongs to the transition period. Sahgal shows her acute awareness of the dependent status of women 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."⁵ Logically speaking their marriage should have fared well since unlike poles attract each other. But that was not to be. In short, it was 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."⁶ Lakshmi, Govind Narayan's wife, also represents herself as a Hindu woman. In her smoothly run household one seldom heard the voices of the servants and the crying of the baby. She always needed her husband and never does anything without him.

REFERENCES:

- Ali, Syed Mashkoor., ed. *Indian Writing in English: A Critical Response*. New Delhi: Creative Books, 2014.
- Bai, K. Meera. *Women's Voices: The Novels of Indian Women Writers*. New Delhi: Prestige Books, 2015.
- Bhalla, M.M., ed. *T.S. Eliot* (proceedings of seminar organised by Congress for Cultural Freedom) Bombay: P.C. Manektala & Sons, 2011.
- Bharat, Meenakshi., ed. *Desert in Bloom: Contemporary Indian Women's Fiction in English*. Delhi: Pencraft International, 2013.

Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge, 2012.

Chanan, Karuna., ed. *Socialisation, Education and Women: Explorations in Gender Identity*. New Delhi: Orient Longman, 1988.

Chaprick, Mukhopadhyay C. and Seymor, Susan., eds. *Women Education and Family Structure in India*. Oxford: Westview Press, 2010.

Cooper, John Xiros, *T.S. Eliot and the Ideology of Four Quartets*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010.

Corresponding Author

Parkashvir*

Research Scholar, Singhania University, Pacheri Bari,
Rajasthan

E-Mail – ashokkumarpsd@gmail.com