

Tradition and Identity in Nayantara Sahgal's Novels: A Feminist Perspective

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Abstract – In this male centric society woman is always dominated all over the world for centuries. All the religious books from all religions namely The Bible, The Quran and Manusmriti accept the role of woman with one voice as a being who lives in the “confines of the household”. But with the passage of time, awareness of education, science and with the help of social institutions, modern woman cried for freedom from the orthodox tradition. Now in 21th century we can see the sign of women’s emancipation. In India Men has taken the responsibility of women’s economic and social security. On the other hand, Indian woman play the role of ‘abla nari’.But now Indian woman is equal to man in every aspect.

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INTRODUCTION

Now Indian woman has changed and she rejects the relational identity to know as her father's daughter, husband's wife and children's mother. Now she is educated, economically independent and is able to understand the artificiality of this relational identity. Now she does not want to restrain herself in the 'confines of the household. Now she wants a respectable place in society equal to man. Although, every woman is a daughter, sister, wife and mother but she wants an individual identity to separate her from these relations.

This quest for identity force her to revolt against the traditional image of Indian woman .Now she is conscious of herself as a being and she is no more an object. Now she is not a part of man, but an individual being. She is ready to learn from her errors and finds her way to salvation. Therefore, a new modern woman rejects the traditional role of a yoked wife, an image given by Shashi Despandey to her central character Jaya in *That Long Silence*.

Indian women novelists in English Kamla Markandya, Mahasweta Devi, Shashi Despandey and Nayantara Sahgal have been presented woman as the main character in their novels. The central theme of women writers is women's search for identity. Nayantara Sahgal is Indian novelists in English who describes issues and problems related to women in her novels. In her novels all female characters show their quest for identity. Being an Indian woman she draws a realistic picture of woman by deep insight into woman's problem. In her novels she describes an emotional and spiritual part of women's personality.

In her novels, Sahgal has presented modern Indian woman's search for identity who creates her own place in the society. Her new woman is conscious of her identity and right in the society. She makes for herself a new place in the patriarchal society. She raises her voice and creates awareness for the rest. Lakshmai Sinha thinks that Sahgal has described the two images of Indian woman namely Abla and Shakti in the character of Rashmi, Nita and Sonali. Nayantrara Sahgal writes her views in a letter to Jasbir Jain as follows:

“I try to create the virtuous women toward a compassionate world. There virtue is a quality of heart and mind and spirit, a kind of dern Sita, if you like, my women are strivers and aspirers, towards freedom, towards goodness, untouched innocence and integrity, and I think there is this quality in the Indian women”

Sahgal is an Indian writer with feminist concern and being an Indian belongs to the great tradition where power defines by the symbol of 'Shakti' .In her novels, she shows concern for woman's struggle for identity. She thinks:

“Through the rewriting women do, new Sitas and Savitris will arise, stripped of false sanctity and crowned with the human virtue of courage. Then at last we will know why they did, what they did, and how their lone, remote struggles can help our search for identity and emancipation.”

In one of her essays '*Women Persons or Possessions*' she criticizes Indian mentality which value women as 'property' and disrespect her as a human being. In eighteenth century woman was not allowed to go outside without male company because she was uneducated. In twenty first

century she is educated, independent even then she is not allowed to go alone because of safety purpose. Sahgal remarks:

"When I heard someone remark we never allow our daughter to go out or I cannot do that, my husband wouldn't like it, sounded a very peculiar, alien jargon. As if I thought, women were property, now persons."

In fact, this is the reality of Indian society but, with the passage of time this mentality of man as well as woman is changing. The above statement shows her concern for individuality in women.

In Nayantara Sahgal's fiction we find twin themes, first is political and second is male -female relation. After independence, India is passing through a transitional period and she sees this because she belongs to Nehru family. She sees many ups and downs in Indian politics. The second theme is the lack of communication between husband and wife that results in unhappiness. Sahgal makes it clear that her novels "more or less reflect the political era we are passing through." She also shows Indian woman's search for identity. She describes both the themes in a very subtle and appropriate way.

The women characters of her novels are concerned with the fundamental question – the destiny of women in the male centric society. They analyze this through the themes of sufferings of women, dominance by man, and urge for companionship. Her novels '*A Time to be Happy*', '*This Time of Morning*' and '*Mistaken Identity*' show her concern for the state of women in the patriarchal society. Her women characters Maya, Rose, Sonali and Nita shows modern Indian woman's search for individual freedom. She describes the theme of women suffering in very appropriate way.

In Sahgal's novel '*This Time of Morning*,' Nita and Rashmi are struggling to make their identity in a male centric society. They are modern educated women so reject traditional taboos. Rashmi comes out from her broken matrimonial relation with Dalip and finds comfort in the arms of Neil. She thinks separation or divorce does not mean the end of life for woman. "I'm not lost. Something will work out. It's not the end of life." (p.45)

Nita is a modern girl who drinks and smokes but she is conscious of her identity. She is against arranged marriage because she wants to self-dependent. She doesn't like her father's interference in her matters like drinking, smoking and in marriage. In the party, she asked for cigarette from Rakesh, but he asked whether her father knows about this habit she says: "Well I keep cigarettes in my room. Daddy doesn't know. Is not it silly not being allowed to do anything until one is married?" (p.40)

Nita expresses her thinking about marriage and she doesn't want to marry till forty five. She has a picture

of her would be husband in her mind but it does not suit to her father. She does not want to marry with a man to whom she is not familiar. Nita stands for modern educated woman who wants to achieve her identity in this society. But she is in search of true love. When Nita and Saleem won during a dance in the party. Saleem says:

"If you're always as lucky as this, Nita, we must take you to the races next time." (p.45) She at once expresses her female agony in the following words: "That's my trouble. I'm always lucky except in love." (p.45)

Kailas-Mira's only daughter Rashmi marries to a bureaucrat but decides to come back home. Rashmi does not think that Dalip is responsible for this. "I don't hate him, she has told herself wearily during the blank intervals between quarrels, I don't wish him harm, but he and I -she could not even think 'we' any longer - cannot go together." (p.12). They are two different persons and their marriage is the decision of their parents but it ends in failure. She is a jolly kind of person but after marriage with Dalip she feels displaced and alienated. She says: "It was marriage, then, that had altered her, made her a moth trapped in cement." (p.44)

On the other hand Rakesh loves her and reminds her in Parish. "This is a city for lovers and it is unbearable without you. If you should change your mind, come to me here. No one can ever love you as I do" (p.43)

Sahgal's female characters Anna Hansen, Sonali, Rose, The Rani of Vijaygarh, Simrit and Sylla all have struggled for their identity. In Nayantara Sahgal's novels we find woman's gradual journey from self-sacrifice to self-realization. Nayantara Sahgal shows the theme of female quest for identity through the portrayal of different female character, conflicting situation, marital tension and domestic traumas in her novels like *A Time to be Happy*, *This Time of Morning* and *Mistaken Identity*. The title of '*This Time of Morning*' (1965) shows the morning after independence, when people had to plan the programmes and strategies to achieve the goals set for people's security, peace and development.

Sahgal attacks the Indian society that woman pleads for an honored place in society. She says that if the woman has given an equal place in society only then every marriage becomes a fair give and take partnership. The main cause of marital discord is the lack of communication and understanding between husband and wife. *Mistaken Identity* (1988) shows two parallel themes: one political about the condition of Indians under the British rule and the attitude of the Britishers treating the Indian like slaves, and the second is narrator's Bhushan Singh (Jumbo) search for his lost love, Razia. When the novel

starts, we find him in jail. He is put in jail with the charge of treason. He is not committed any crime but it is the year 1929 and it is the case of mistaken identity. In the jail, he tells the other prisoners the story of his colourful past. In the jail they were treated in very inhuman way. Comrade Pillai told him of his father remarriage. He told: "This third marriage of your father's took place in November 1917. I suppose he was too happy getting married to have any reaction to the Revolution?" (p.58) Jumbo reveals his story as well as of his mother. His mother was twenty-four year old when he was born. She was very strong lady and hide whenever there was talk of father's re-marriage.

"Whatever had come over the shy thirteen-year-old rosebud bride she had brought to Vijaygarh? What in the world could have happened in something as ordinary as marriage to wound her dove, her timid little love?" (p.33)

In '*Mistaken Identity*' as the story moves we come to know about Bhushan's affection with Razia. But at that time love with Muslim girl was crime. When people come to know of their love there was riot in Vijaygarh. Fifteen Hindus, ten Muslims and two police men are killed. "Are you out of your mind?" Father shouted, quite forgetting he was young. "My only son besotted with the sluttish of a daughter of a Mussalman school inspector?" He was kept at home until the riot settled down. '*Mistaken Identity*' is the portrayal of Jumbo's mother who was ill treated and despised by his father.

In her last novel, '*Lesser Breeds*' we see the point of view of male protagonist throughout the book. It shows that she probes deeply inside the psyche of her female as well as male character. The women in Lesser Breed are passive creatures. In her third novel '*Storm in Chandigarh*' she shows emergency period that was declared during the time of Indra Gandhi.

In her early novels like '*Time to be Happy*' and '*This Time of Morning*' she shows Indian women want to get freedom and struggle to get rid of the orthodox rituals and tradition. Where as in '*Mistaken Identity*' women like Sonali, Rose and Nita come out of that bondage and regain their self-identity. Moreover, they want freedom in taking decision about their dressing sense, eating habits, smoking, drinking etc. But now they can take decisions on their marriage, career and even on divorce also. The change that we see in Sehgal's women character can see in today's Indian women also.

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