

Awakening of New Consciousness in Sahgal's Women

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Abstract: *Women in India were unaware of their miserable condition. It is in the post independence period the women's quest for identity of her own commenced. The 20th century saw the shift from outer to inner sensibilities and no one can better understand a man or woman better a feminine writer. In modern English fiction a number of women novelists have arrived on the literary scene, they have set out making new forays in to the world of women. Nayantara Sahgal being a feminist writer has emphasized in her novels on freedom and a new definition of the New Women. Sahgal's heroines are well aware of the injustice done to them in their marriage and they come out of this traditional bond.*

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Women, in India, were long unaware of their miserable condition. It was only with the advent of the Indian Renaissance, the new education, political struggles and the ever-increasing Western impact that they began to show some signs of awakening. Fortunately for them, enlightened leadership encouraged them in their forward march. The most important Indian leaders had implicit faith in the equality of men and women, and all of them tried to improve a lot of Indian Women. After Indian independence, the country's constitution granted them rights at par with the males.

Interestingly, most of the reformers dedicated to the cause of women's emancipation were men of great learning. They were inspired by the rich cultured heritage of India which ascribed women's respectable place in society and the western ideas. The post independence period witnessed a welcome change in the growth of women, from being a docile domestic, passive species to a reasonable, analyzing, educated individual who can take independent decision not only for herself, but also for others. Her potentials and powers have shown that she can embrace several roles in herself. This New Women has puncture the stereotyped fallacies attributed to female nature and demanded a position of equality for herself.

It is in the post independence period the women's quest for identity of her own commenced. As the country acquired a national identity of its own, the women's quest for her own self also followed. The spark that was triggered off by the Freedom Movement now started spreading championed by references like M.K.Gandhi and others.

It is only in the early 20th century that the voice of New Women's definition of herself, a quest for her identity and excellence came in to emergence. The 20th century saw the shift from outer to inner sensibilities and no one can better understand a man or woman better a feminine writer. In

modern English fiction a number of women novelists have arrived on the literary scene, they have set out making new forays in to the world of women.

Nayantara Sahgal being a feminist writer has emphasized in her novels on freedom and a new definition of the New Women. Sahgal's heroines are well aware of the injustice done to them in their marriage and they come out of this traditional bond. Their walk out reflect the social changing conditions during the 20th century. In spite of being deep – rooted in Indian culture, they care and yearn for personal freedom and have their own identities. According to Sahgal, freedom for women implies the awareness of her identity and raising the voice against injustice. Sometime they revolt against the exploitations of men and sometimes compromise with the social reality.

Nayantara Sahgal's women are of two types: women who are willing to surrender themselves to the traditional restriction of their marriage life and women who when their self-respect is denied, do not hesitate to rebel and revolt. Mostly Sahgal's women suffer from mental agony of the broken marriage which makes them feel lonely and empty. The search for meaningful relationship and the quest for identity in Sahgal's distress women, forces them even for a remarriage. Rashmi, Saroj and Simrit finally emerge as free women.

Maya and Kusum in *A Time to be Happy* are submissive. Maya endures an emotional isolation in marital life. She neither revolts nor succumbs to her destiny. She sets about building another world which, though not so satisfactory but a substitute for married happiness. Kusum's marriage to Sanad is a half-way between the two worlds of orthodoxy and freedom. Both of them belong to entirely different backgrounds. The starting months of their marriage was unhappy but they managed to overcome the difficulties.

Nita and Rashmi in *This Time of Morning* are depicted as young women who desire freedom outside marriage. They are the products of the changed social conditions. Their attitude is quite different from that of Maya and Kusum. Nita objects to arranged marriage. So when she is engaged to Vijay, she is unhappy. She feels that such a marriage will not provide her with emotional security. Vijay sees her as a possession rather than as an individual with personal ideas and attitude. Nita finds no prospects of fulfillment for herself in her marriage with Vijay.

Rashmi, on other hand, with an unhappy marriage with Rakesh decided to seek a divorce. She wants to have a bondage on the basis of equality not on the basis of domination of self-effacement. She could not bear with her unhappy married life for long. It is the realization of inner self of the emerging New Woman. Kailas is quite correct when he says that Rashmi's decision shows "..... a torrential release from ancient grooves and bonds, ancient pain and suppression" (Sahgal, *This Time of Morning*: 214).

Similarly Uma, who had arranged marriage with Arjun Mitra too feels unhappy with her married life. It is an arranged marriage and Mitra "chose" Uma to be his wife. He does not bother to find out from Uma whether she likes him or not. Perhaps his stature and family background have made him take Uma

for granted. He assumes that since it is an arranged marriage, she will obey the man chosen for her. That is the mistake committed by Mitra. He being a man of thirty-three chooses a girl of nineteen as his wife.

Arjun “fails to understand” her “boredom” at home. Arjun only compares her with other women who are occupied with household work. He wonders why Uma cannot do the same thing. He seems to be a “bookworm” for as soon as he finishes his “dinner” he goes back to his “study”. He cannot understand the desires of a young bride and a passionate woman. He has grown up physically but his mind has not grown up enough to understand a young woman’s feelings and aspirations.

The huge age gap and lack of intimacy, tenderness, communication and companionship between Arjun Mitra and Uma are the main reasons why Uma has an extra-marital relationship with Neil Berensen. Arjun Mitra should have been broad-minded to understand that Uma is not mature enough to understand married life. Instead, he fails to understand her and concentrates only on his files and office work. This makes Uma to get extremely bored with her fruitless marriage and seeks solace outside her marriage life.

Saroj of *Storm in Chandigarh*, like Rashmi, is another unhappy wife who is denied reciprocal involvement in her marriage with Inder. Inder does not regard her as a person with ideas, feelings and emotions. In spite of four years of married life with two children, there is no harmony in her marriage. Out of innocence she tells about her affair before marriage, but the reactions of Inder are very violent. He regards it as a serious moral lapse in his wife and feels that he has been wronged in marrying her. He thinks that Saroj’s act has no place “.... in an order that clearly demarcated the roles of men and women, unless that vulnerable order was breached, trampled and mocked. He was maddened by it. When it came over him he sat looking at Saroj with revulsion that had ancient, tribal male roots” (Sahgal, *Storm in Chandigarh*: 96).

But of this act of Saroj, in fact, is a part of her growing up. As a matter of fact, Saroj has no such involvement after her marriage. She was quite faithful to her husband. She is wholeheartedly involved in her marriage to Inder, but he uses the act of her single affair to humble her and destroy her sense of innocence. The two are made up of contrasting characteristics. While Inder has no time for finer things, for emotional involvements and for tenderness, Saroj longs to penetrate his inflexibility. He leaves her outside, isolated and unhappy beating against”..... his numbness like a bird against a window pane, trapped in a futile frenzy” (*Storm in Chandigarh*: 97). Saroj wants to be recognized of an individual while Inder treats her as a wife, as a mere possession. To him a woman is nothing more than this. He feels that man-woman relationship is based on domination. Individuality in women disgusts him. He thinks, “A thousand years from now a woman will still want and need a master, the man who will own and command her – and that’s the she’ll respect” (*Storm in Chandigarh*: 92). No doubt Saroj is too willing to accept her role as a wife and does not want to seek anything outside marriage but, at the same time she also wants to seek equality, continuity and involvement.

Disgusted at Saroj’s demands for equality and involvement in marriage, Inder take refuge in Mara’s friendship. Inder’s indifferent and harden behavior forces Saroj to realize the need to assert her

individuality and she, "... revolts against the established norms by leaving a marriage that had become an emotional wasteland for her" (*Storm in Chandigarh*: 89).

If Saroj leaves her home, it is in desperate realization that Inder and she can never come to terms. She is now convinced at her purity and chastity. She understands that, "Conformity is not morality and her departure is a move towards personal freedom and the rejection of role thrust upon her." Saroj's departure from her home is an initiation towards personal freedom of the New Woman. Her courage is her virtue and she asserts her individuality. Saroj, no doubt is the embodiment of Nayantara Sahgal's own vision of virtuous woman.

Through Lydia and Nell in *A Situation in New Delhi*, Sahgal depicts how the women have to undergo torments defenselessly in the society. Lydia and Nell, the two ladies who become Michael's wives successively in *A Situation in New Delhi* have to seek divorce because they find the husband's behavior to be intolerable. When Michael was Lydia's husband, his behavior towards her was far from satisfactory. Likewise, Nell began to feel soon after her marriage with him that he was only using her, as is evident from her remark: "You go on using (women) up like matches..." (ASID, p.12). Since in each of these cases it is the husband who is at fault, it can be safely inferred that the novelist lays blame for the failure of each of these marriages at the husband's door and regards the wife as a victim of the male domination in society.

Simrit of '*The Day in Shadow*' just resembles Saroj. Simrit is a step ahead of Saroj in leaving not only home and her husband but also seeking divorce from him. Divorce which is supposed to free women from bondage of marriage, in fact brings more trouble in the name of Consent Terms which is signed by Simrit during the divorce settlement. Simrit faces social cum financial problems that a divorcee faces in Indian society.

Saroj's marriage breaks due to lack of understanding while Simrit's love marriage breaks due to lack of continuity and warmth in life from Som. The value of life she respects has become meaningless in Som's business world full of materialistic ambitions. She needs something more than mere material prosperity. Since this relationship is not at all emotional she feels isolated and cold in her physical relationship with Som. The male ego of Som is badly hurt when Simrit fails to involve in the physical act. So, he give her an ultimatum to choose either to be a docile wife or to leave home once for all.

Simrit being a woman longing for self fulfillment and independence walks out from Som's life breaking the seventeen years marriage bond. Simrit had to be very courageous to free herself from the bonds of marriage and divorce settlement. This courage shows the emergence of the new Simrit who is able to make choices, take decisions and regard herself as a person.

Sahgal's women, especially Saroj and Simrit make every possible effort to compromise and strengthen their relationships with their husbands. They desire to be good wives who try to adjust and reconcile but when their individuality and self respect are denied they exhibit rare courage. They do not feel guilty in breaking up the traditional bonds by the society and also in establishing them as independent women, firm in their values, seeking justice, identity and equality with men.

Thus the women protagonists of Sahgal do generally find themselves ill at ease with the prevailing social norms of conduct. Sahgal's women display extraordinary courage and will power and transcend the limitations of society to advance nearer to the goals they set for themselves.

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