

## STATUS OF WOMEN: A STUDY OF NAYANTARA SAHGAL'S NOVELS

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**Abstract:**

*In India women were unaware about their miserable condition in the society. Unless and until women herself will not help herself to improve her status and condition no other can help her. The concept of ideal women has been based on mythical personage like Sita. Women were expected to be under the care of male throughout her life. With the progress in time the Indian women began to show some signs of awakening. Women are expected to remain within socially constructed boundaries and if any women show courage to cross those boundaries, she gets the tag of shameless and unwomanly. The novels of Sahgal from 'A Time to be Happy' to 'Mistaken Identity' show her deep concern with parlous status of women in the parochial society. Sahgal represents new morality, according to which women are not taken as a mere toy, an object of lust and momentary pleasure, but man's equal and honoured partner. This paper seeks to examine the gradual change for the better in the mental makeup of the heroines of the novels and their courage to come out of the bondages.*

**Key Words:** Status, empowerment, ideal woman, parochial society.

Nayantara Sahgal's *A Time to be Happy* depicts the quest for identity of a young, wealthy and westernized Indian during the last phase of the freedom movement and the beginning years of Independent India. Her novel deals with the period roughly between 1932 and 1943. Like Raja Rao's *Kanthapura*, R. K. Narayan's *Waiting for the Mahatma* and Mulk Raj Anand's *The Sword and the Sickle* it also depicts the process of politicization initiated into Indian consciousness. *A Time to be Happy* is a submerged saga of Indian national movement under the leadership of Gandhiji, whose approach is strongly idealistic and whose social and political ideas are 'highly charged with values'. Gandhiji is not considered a mere politician as he is also a religious man in personal life. Often he is called a saint among politicians and a politician among saints.

In *Storm in Chandigarh*, Mrs. Sahgal points out that the dual moral code of the patriarchal society is the reason for the incompatibility between the wife and the husband. Sari is loyal to her husband after the marriage. But Inder, for whom the moral lapse in a man is taken for granted, thinks that he is deceived by his wife as she had a pre-marital affair, whereas she is not guilty as she has revealed it even before the marriage. This is because of the change of attitude to the whole issue of marriage and chastity. Through the portrayal of three young couples, Sari-Inder, Jet-Mira and Vishal-Lela, Mrs. Sahgal proves that life becomes stiffened and it turns out into a vanishing search for communication when the oxygen of understanding is not there.

In *Rich Like Us* Mrs. Sahgal exposes those Indians who honour the belief that marriage is a sacrament more in breach than in observance. Mrs. Sahgal points out that the domestic world of the West has also become tumultuous and vulnerable. For her, the relationship between Nicholas and Anna in *Plans for Departure* is the ideal one. Nicholas gives his wife the freedom even to contradict him. They live like independent individuals and friends respecting each other and loving each other, rather than like the master and the chattel. She makes it clear that the sexual relationship is only a fraction of the total commitment

between the husband and the wife. Mrs. Sahgal reiterates her father's view that the matrimonial harmony depends on a high degree of civilization on the part of the husband and the wife. *Rich Like Us* is dedicated by the author to the "Indo-British Experience and what its sharers have learned from each other." The novel presents altogether different perspective from that of the earlier novels. It reveals the despicable depths of degradation to which the character of the post-Independent India has fallen by the time the Emergency was imposed nearly three decades after Independence.

Sahgal makes a systematic effort to demolish deeply ingrained attitudes regarding women, before indicating ways in which new image can be formulated. The novels written by Sahgal are exactly like the commentaries on the struggle of women to liberate her from the chains. Sahgal portrays women's anger or protest, who finally became able to break the traditional codes or did grow strong enough to break the ice. Sahgal strongly pleads for a real change in the condition of women for being a toy in the hands of man to becoming a strong partner in life with equal rights and dignity. The women who value chastity, acceptance and compromise are finally feeling necessary to break the tradition, cross the age-old formidable boundaries and setup a life of their own. Sahgal portrays women who are not only deeply aware of their emotional needs but also fervently strive self-fulfillment. These women show courage of rejecting orthodox traditional social setup in favor of liberal and unconventional ways of life, looking forward to a clean break from the past. But this confession actually dooms her marriage. Inder represents the traditional patriarchal attitude of society towards women which put high premium on female chastity and virginity before marriage, while in the same patriarchal set-up the idea of male chastity is never questioned. Inder's indifferent and hardened behavior forces Saroj to realise the need of asserting her individuality and she, "...revolts against the established norms by leaving a marriage that had become an emotional wasteland for her".

As a women novelist, Sahgal recognizes that her primary obligation is that of advocating the emancipation of women. Sahgal in her novels vividly describe how women are exploited even during the modern times by both the individual and the society. Sahgal also traces out a slow and gradual deviation from the stereotype of the virtuous women to redefine virtue. Sahgal condemns self-immolation and suffering, and points out the virtue of modern women is "courage which is a willingness to risk the unknown and to face the consequences". Through the portrayal of Saroj, Simrit, and Rashmi in her novels Sahgal actually holds a mirror to the society that subjects its women to worst type of inhuman exploitation. Her women from Maya to the mother figure Rancee 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. Her women are victims of a conventional society which does not permit women to hold their own views. Sahgal demands social justice for women, her focus being on freedom.

According to Sahgal, freedom for women implies awareness of her identity and raising voice against injustice. Sometimes they revolt against the exploitation of men and sometimes compromises with social reality. Saroj, the female protagonist in the novel *Storm in Chandigarh* emerges as a victim of male tyranny and chauvinism. She fears rather than loves her husband. She is a person who loves mutual trust, consideration, honesty, communication and absence of pretense in a relationship. "Hailing from a liberal family, believing in openness and trust as a hallmark of relationships, Saroj had naively presumed that her husband shared those values, not realizing that he was the product of an atmosphere where male dominance is the most formidable of cults." She is thoroughly truthful to Inder, her husband and her honesty in marital relationship can be gauged from the fact that she even confesses about her pre-marital relationship to him. Another women character Simrit of *The Day in Shadow* makes every possible effort to compromise and strength their relationship with her husband. Simrit like all Indian women loves her husband and wants her husband to have emotional connection with her, instead of only physical connection.

The value of life she respects has become meaningless in Som's (her husband) business world full

of materialistic ambitions. She needs something more than mere material property. 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 gives 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 of 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. Simrit doesn't want to be known as her husband's wife but as her own self. 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 representative of older generation whereas Maya belongs to the transition period. In the novels of Sahgal women are no more goddesses; they are human beings and move from bondage to freedom, from indecision to self-assertion, from weakness to strength. Sahgal's women characters like Saroj, Simrit, Rashmi, and Anna all leave their husbands or break the marriage which doesn't allow them to be free and live life in their own way.

### Conclusion

Nayantara Sahgal successfully presents in her novels the dilemma which modern women are facing in recent times. Women in her novels are conscious of their emotional needs and strive for self-fulfillment and reject the existing traditions and social set-up and long for a more liberal and unconventional way of life. Her novels portray women trapped 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 in their own feet. The hardships and sufferings involved in fighting against an established order, is very well portrayed in her novels. Sahgal's women characters are individuals who can remain independent within the framework of society into which they were born. Sahgal believes that women should try to understand and realize herself as a human being and not just as an appendage to some male life. With the efforts of Nayantara Sahgal and other feminist writers the women has now attained a respectable position in family and the society but still the war is not over.

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