

From Subjugation to Emancipation: Portrayal of women Protagonists in the select novels of Nayantara Sahgal

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In almost every novel Sahgal has a central woman character. She is deeply apprehensive with the need for freedom for women to become aware of themselves as individuals which society has normally denied them this freedom. The process towards selfhood begun unconsciously by Kusum in her first novel *A Time to be Happy* is consciously realized by Rashmi, Saroj and Simrit in her later novels. Childlessness is also a factor which spoils the harmonious marital relationship of the couples. The Indian society considers childlessness, as a curse on barren woman. The husband exploits the situation to marry another girl to beget an heir.

The emancipation of women was initiated by the Brahmo Samaj and is said to have come a long way especially after India's independence. Sahgal says in her article *Turning Point* that, "A man's ego and ambition. I learned must be served first. In case of conflict, the man's will and desires must prevail" (15). But looking at the overall social status of women particularly in the rustic and rearward areas, no one can refute that male chauvinism still rules our society.

Sahgal gradually moves towards an awareness of her emotional needs and reflects her own life and sensibility like the protagonists Rashmi and Simrit. There are other women who are victims and oppressors both like Uma Mitra in *This Time of Morning*. She is a victim of a social system which leaves no scope for individual freedom because they make no effort to overcome it. Uma, married to a man much older than her, refuses to conform to his expectations of her. Uma is young and gay and when she finds no means of self-expression within her marriage she gives free rein to her unruliness and flaunts her non-conformity in her husband's face. It is many years later, Arjun realizes his own share in the failure of their marriage and regrets.

Sahgal's first two women Maya and Rashmi are still women in stasis but the next two protagonists of Sahgal - namely Saroj and Simrit, mark a clear advancement from the point of view of self-determination. Despite all their initial hesitance, when Saroj and Simrit break free from the shackles of oppression there is no remorse. Quest for identity may be a Herculean task in a patriarchal society but once women have strong will and determination, they act as real 'Shaktis'. (Choubey Web)

The novels *Storm in Chandigarh* and *The Day in Shadow* present the sad plight of women in male-dominated society. The female protagonists of these novels experience conflict, aggravation, long drawn period of stress and bitterness in the prison house of loveless marriage. These novels also show how the protagonists mature through their bitter experiences to better experiences. Sahgal does not view her women characters as a wage earners or career woman but mainly as married women-as wives, daughters

and mothers and it is in these roles that they wish to experience freedom and to become aware of themselves as individual and to be accepted as equals.

In her fictional depiction of women attempting to free themselves from oppressive relationships, Sahgal is more direct in her feminist sympathies. S.K. Yadav comments "Sahgal's female protagonists are highly aware of their sexuality and give due recognition to their needs and come out of their old inhibitions associated with it"(43). The 'new women' are not ready to be treated as a door-mat or a piece of furniture meant for the expediency of man. They refuse to be silent under tyrannical forces. They struggle against the hardships, abandon and dual moral standards to which they are subjected. Their demand for their rightful place, appreciation and respect due to them is prompted by an inner urge to make their existence a meaningful one.

Their existential struggle to establish their identity goes often fruitless and ends in breaking their marital relationships. The modern women like to stand on their own feet. They think in terms of building up a strong plinth of self-confidence. They refuse to remain under male subjugation. The spread of education and influence of welfare associations inspired the woman to come out of the age-old shackles of bondage. Simon de Beauvoir observes, "Marriage is the destiny traditionally offered to women by society" (445). The feminists maintain that woman is not born but made of society: "One is not born, but rather becomes a woman, no biological, psychological or economic fate determines the figure that the human female represents in society; it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature, intermediate between male and eunuch, which is described as feminine" (Beauvoir 295). According to Novvara, the myth related to the role of women in Britain prescribes that, a mother should devote herself in providing a secure environment for her small children. A married woman cannot pursue a career which demands mobility. Works of art by women still have to be judged as women's work. Membership of an all male club or society can be prestigious; membership of a woman's organization is a subject for facetious remarks.(317)

Sahgal makes a systematic and sustained effort to demolish the deeply ingrained attitudes regarding women, before indicating ways in which a new image can be formulated.

With an admirable steadfastness, she upholds her commitment to man-woman relationships based on mutual trust and honest communication between two equal individuals. In almost all the novels, Sahgal has gone deep into the female consciousness. She explores the nature and scope of the trauma of womenfolk in all her novels. A great deal has been said about Sahgal's feminist stance in her fiction. This, however, is not the strident feminism of the Western writers.

Her female characters are individuals who can remain independent within the framework of society into which they were born. She has portrayed women's sufferings without sentimentality and with such vividness that she may well be described as anatomist of the feminine psyche. 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 the novels of Sahgal, there is a very sensitive depiction of the way women suffer due to the sexist bias in the patriarchal society, which gives a subordinate position to women and always treats them as second-rate citizens.

Though Sahgal has been hailed chiefly as a political novelist, her feminist concern is understandable and her fighter spirit quite choral in her fiction. In all her works, there is a combination of

two worlds: the personal world of man-woman relationship and the impersonal world of politics. The fictional journey of Sahgal from *A Time to be Happy* to *The Day in Shadow* shows her deep concern with the parlous state of women in the parochial society. "Though it is easy to obtain divorce through the Hindu Code Bill, the attitudes of the society never underwent any change; the stigma of divorce was looked upon by the society as some indelible scar left by some epidemic"(Tony 97).She is able to go deep into the psyche of her female characters and study them with sympathy and understanding. Husband-wife hostility resulting from lack of communication, East-West encounter, extramarital relationship, existentialist problems and temperamental incompatibility form the chief themes in Sahgal's novels.

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