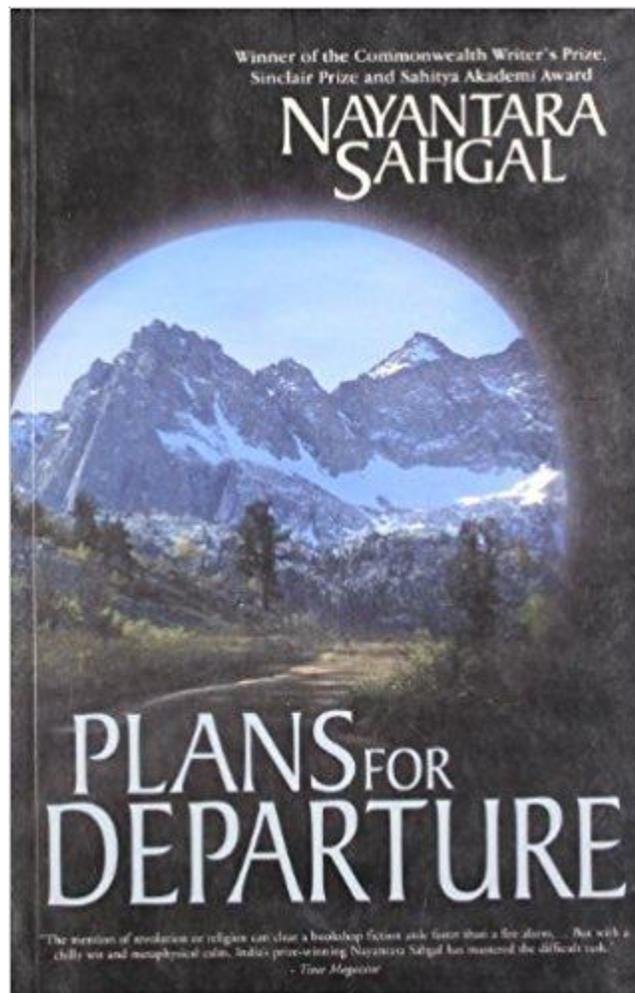

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Dr. R. Anuja, MBA, M.Phil., Ph.D., Editor

Aspects of Gender Conflict in English Literature

**Oppression of Women as Depicted in Selected Novels of
Nayantara Sahgal**

Lt. Dr. N. Mythili



Abstract

Gender plays a vital role in the literary field. For centuries women have been exploited and victimized by male-dominated societies in India and all over the world. The continuing trend of exploitation of woman by man provokes her to revolt against the social system and aspire for

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its reconstitution, under a more equitable dispensation. But with the spread of education and the influence of a few institutions and organizations which have urged for women's emancipation from the age-old shackles, some signs of awakening among women have become visible. The awareness of the need for liberation from the shackles of marital bondage has been felt by many an educated woman in the India of the post-independence era.

Self-identity and freedom to an individual in social, political and domestic milieu plays a prominent role in the life of every human being. When these rights are tested to be bestowed on an individual, there arises the necessity to fight for conquering those rights. The great Miltonic verse from *Paradise Lost* assures the value of "freedom", when Satan says, "Better to reign in hell than to serve in Heaven." Not a good quote for women's freedom, or for any freedom. Hell stands for unhappy joyless lives.

Highlighting the necessity of freedom to an individual, Nayantara Sahgal pictures the struggle for social and domestic rights through her female protagonists. In this paper I would like to explore the role of gender in literature through Sahgal's venture in fighting for the social and domestic rights of her women characters, who are the representatives of womanhood in the society.

The quest is done through Sahgal's selected female characters such as: Rashmi in *This Time of Morning*, Simrit in *The Day in Shadow*, Anna Hansen in *Plans for Departure*, Sonali in *Rich like us*. All her female protagonists express their quest at different phases of their lives. Sahgal's fictional world presents the experience of conflict, frustration and a long drawn period of stress, through which characters mature and eventually find a stable identity of their own. Different types of women are presented in Sahgal's novels.

Keywords: Nayantara Sahgal, exploitation of women, women's freedom, Nayantara Sahgal, marital bondage, self-expression

Introduction

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Sahgal's entire fictional corpus revolves round the twin themes; first, the political one, and the second, the lack of communication between people, especially between husband and wife, resulting in unhappiness. Along with the political theme, she also portrays the modern Indian woman's search for individual freedom and self-realization. She delineates both the motifs in a very subtle and intricate manner.

Liberal in outlook, Sahgal believes in the "new humanism" and "new morality" according to which woman is not to be taken as "a sex object and glamour girl, fed on fake dreams of perpetual youth, lulled into a passive role that requires no individuality," but as man's equal and honoured partner.

A Note on Nayantara Sahgal

Born in British India on May 10, 1927 in Allahabad, Nayantara Sahgal is an Indian writer in English whose fiction has received worldwide recognition. She is the daughter of Jawaharlal Nehru's sister Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit. During the emergency imposed by her first cousin, Indira Gandhi, she stood up against the totalitarian government, giving evidence of her independence of thought. Throughout her life she has stood for freedom, religious tolerance and non-violence. Nayantara Sahgal graduated from Woodstock School in Landour in 1943 and from Wellesley College in 1947. Her most popular novel, *Rich Like Us* (1985) won her the Sinclair Prize; *Plans for Departure* (1985) won her the Commonwealth Writer's Prize. She received the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1987. She lives in Dehradun, Uttaranchal.

Sahgal's Women - Thrust for Domestic Freedom

There is something distinct in the women characters of Nayantara Sahgal - something in their social and emotional make up that express itself in their attitude to persons and events. In these women characters, there is a deep longing for self-fulfillment through self-expression. They analyze this through the metaphors that deal with the themes of suffering, dominance, and an urge for companionship. Her novels from *A Time to be Happy* to *Mistaken Identity* show her deep concern with the perilous state of women in the patriarchal society. Her women from her prototype Maya to the mother figure Renee in *Mistaken Identity* rise against the stultifying

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culture which impedes women's progress and rebel against all those years of oppression, marks the third and the most mature phase of Sahgal's career. The women belonging to this phase are strong-willed, emotionally independent women. They refuse to bow down before the strangle hold of men, right from the beginning. They are mistresses of indomitable spirit. And the credit goes to Anna Hansen, Sonali, Rose, and the Rani of Vijaygarh, Simrit, Saroj, and Sylla for holding the flag of the new woman.

Sahgal's women have only one passion: it is the longing to be free, freedom from all restraint in word and deed being their monomania. They want to be fully alive.

Rashmi in *This Time Of Morning*

The vivacious and outgoing Rashmi in this novel, the only daughter of Kailas and Mera comes back to her parents, having deserted her discontented husband Dalip, an I.A.S officer, contemplating divorce. Rashmi experiences all the pangs of a divided self, a vital segment of her being clamoring for separation and release from her husband, and the other part still cherishing the savoured moments of togetherness in the early years of her marriage. Finally Rashmi resolves to divorce, to work and live alone in Delhi. Eventually, an irresistible urge for communication in confidence she moves closely with Neil Berensen, a Norwegian Architect. Soon Rashmi breaks off her relationship with Neil too, as he fails to satisfy her inmost need for communication. At last she renews her childhood friendship with Rakesh. With a deep longing for communication within her, she asks Rakesh when the train is about to leave, "Rakesh Will you write to me? There is much I'd like to share with you." Thus she accepts Rakesh as a true companion.

Rashmi's divorce and her relationship with Neil are not a tasteless parody of transplanted modernity, but an inner need for communication and involvement which remain satisfied.

Anna Hansen in *The Plans For Departure*

Nayantara Sahgal's *Plans for Departure* is the story of Anna Hansen, a Danish girl. Anna is one of the three major female characters in the novel. She is also the protagonist, a person who

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wants to taste the essence of life in its magnificent as well as mundane aspects. It is her desire for self-realization that she postpones her marriage to an English diplomat, Nicholas. She wants to understand life and asserts her right to be the authentic self.

Anna's involvement with the suffragettes makes her aware of both the courage and dedication needed to bring about political change, and the brutal steps those who enforce patriarchal laws are prepared to employ to prevent protest. It is this awareness which initially prompts her to learn more about Indian demands for independence. Her indomitable independence and her sense of freedom provide a striking contrast to the British imperialism and the suffocating political situation of 1914.

Moreover, she has come to India for self-realization, the age-old Indian concept of the ideal of life. First, however, Anna must challenge the social conventions of her own society - where "women are not trained for anything except chastity and self-denial." Her resultant behavior, which is unconventional, she arrives in India where she is employed as an assistant for Sir Nitin Basu. Anna's self-determination is mirrored in her decision to postpone her wedding to Nicholas. Whatever Anna may have achieved through her personal journey towards emancipation, a sympathetic male character appears to be a necessary adjunct to any equal relationship.

As beloved mother, and an equal sharer of social rights and responsibilities, the woman is neither a commodity nor a brainless beauty. Rather than being judged in terms of male norms, "women need to look at themselves ... as the norm itself", aptly remarks Jasbir Jain. The choice is between woman as a homemaker and woman as a professional. "Only exceptionally talented girls," rightly says Helen Deutsch, "can carry a surplus of intellect without injuring their affective lives".

Sonali in *Rich Like Us*

Sonali in the novel *Rich Like Us*, symbolizes Sahgal's philosophy of active intervention in life. Sonali is a conscientious I.A.S. officer working as Joint Secretary in the Ministry of

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Industry in New Delhi. By creating a character like Sonali who is very critical towards established views concerning high caste (Kashmiri, Brahmin) Indian femininity, Sahgal is suggesting new patterns of feminine identity, more attuned to citizenship, professionalism and social responsibility. Sonali is quite different from the stereo type of women found in Indo-English fiction. Her problem is not marital disharmony or male domination. Her problem is how to cope with the hypocrisy, red-tape and corruption that have crept into the Indian Administrative Service? She is intelligent and intellectually independent, yet committed to communal good, uncompromisingly conscientious and idealistic.

In the wake of Emergency, as she refuses to interpret rules to the advantage of her political bosses, she is transferred without warning, demoted and punished. A revolt against the authoritarianism of the ruling government which has already been firing itself into a rage inside her, now becomes an uncontrollable fury and she decides that she can no longer be a party to the widespread conspiracy of silence that is Civil Service. Sonali sustains moral courage and strength to face up the situation. After her resignation, the thirty eight year old Sonali becomes a central force to articulate and share the novelist's humanistic vision as only a woman can. We look through the unimaginable miseries and terror, let loose on her class by the men that become manifest first through her closeness with Rose. She feels concerned with Rose's predicament in so unpleasant a situation with her husband lying in coma and the stepson Dev denying her allowance of , to render her life a miserable experience.

Simrit, the Rebellious in *Rich Like Us*

Simrit in *Rich Like Us* is also a strong new woman in the sense that she dares to come out from the periphery of marriage. She is conscious of her identity and to achieve it she leaves her husband even after seventeen years of her marriage. It is Simrit's hesitant journey towards identity which is the product of that sensitivity of her which has made her a writer.

It is Simrit's rebelliousness, her willingness to change helps her in releasing her from the hold of the past; the old world where she had watched injustice prevail on the basis of gender and class makes way for a new one, where the possibilities of equality and opportunity are promised to all, irrespective of class, caste or gender. Therefore, she accepts divorce to get free from her wealthy

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business husband and walks out on her husband to carve out her own destiny. She could not compromise her self-respect. She leaves Som and moves elsewhere with her children, learning to cope with things on her own.

Her divorce is her first step towards self-discovery, for she has managed to break out of the enclosure; her next step is her learning to cope with things on her own through reaching out to Raj and fulfilling her own sexuality. Simrit like a woman aware, is able to break free of the patriarchal enclosure and come to terms with herself. Her decision to remarry is a sign not of continuing subjugation but of social and sexual emancipation that leads to autonomy and self-hood. Her days "could be entirely hers", and promise unending adventure.

Simrit in *The day in Shadow*

For Simrit in *The day in Shadow*, divorce does not bring freedom, but confrontation with all that is orthodox in this man-centered society. Out of this struggle is born a new Simrit, a person who makes choice, takes decisions and becomes aware of herself as a person.

Conclusion

Throughout the novels of Nayantara Sahgal, her female protagonists stretch "the air of freedom and freshness" and struggle "to break off the orthodox Indian conventions and moribund tradition." Women of Sahgal's fictional world come out of the shackles of bondage in their struggle to regain their self – abnegated identity. Moreover their freedom is not restricted to the superficial aspects such as in the matters of dress, eating habits, etc. but something deep inside the individuals, deeply rooted humanistic altitude to love, marriage and divorce aspects so central to female world.

Sahgal's women are all on quest for constructive and meaningful relationships with men demanding mutual understanding and involvement. Thus the women portrayals of Sahgal conveys their struggle for social and domestic rights , have faced many problems, conflicts, frustrations and inner stress in their lives through which individuals mature and eventually find a stable identity of their own.

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Sahgal's women reaffirm her positive message that women can take steps to transform their own lives, and that with courage and determination they can challenge the codes which constrict them and achieve their social and domestic rights.

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Lt. Dr. N. Mythili
Assistant Professor of English
Sri Vasavi College
Erode 638316
Tamilnadu
India
srimythi@yahoo.co.in