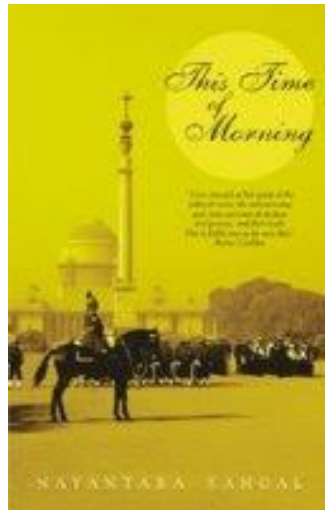


The Plight of Women before Marriage in Nayantara Sahgal's *This Time of Morning*

M. Selvanayaki, M.A., M.Ed., M.Phil., MLISC, Ph.D. Research Scholar



Abstract

Sahgal is the most thoroughgoing feminist among the women writers of Indian English fiction. She has also been more deeply interested in Indian political developments than the others. Her novels naturally have Indian politics as their central theme. These two themes, the evolution of India's political destiny and the liberation of Indian women from the rigid orthodoxies of traditional Indian society, dominate her novel *This Time of Morning*. This paper will attempt to explore the various methods by which Sahgal portrays her women characters in the above novel, showing how the patriarchal system has eroded for ages, the very fabric of women's life and status in Indian society.

Key words: Nayantara Sahgal, *This time of morning*, India's independence, liberation of Indian women

Introduction

While it is generally accepted that Sahgal's family connections greatly fitted her for the role of a political novelist, her feminism has not evoked much comment. This is somewhat surprising as the two are so closely related that it is difficult to think of one of these themes without the other. Indeed, there are significant variations in the proportion of politics and feminism in her novels. Her first novel, *A Time to be Happy* was written in a spirit of exhilaration and unbounded confidence in the political future of India and the total emancipation of Indian women. However, in *This Time of Morning*, there is a gradually increasing sense of disenchantment and a pervasive anxiety about the political trends emerging in recent years. In direct proportion to this disenchantment, feminism, particularly the relationship between men and women assumes increasing importance.

Also a Feminist Novelist

Nayantara Sahgal's characters are not drawn with any great subtlety and most of them are 'flat', conforming to certain distinctive types. Some of them serve, as her mouthpieces. While a few are political characters, good as well as bad, others are proponents and propagandists of her feminist views.

No other woman writer consistently presents such extreme feminist views in her novels as Nayantara Sahgal does. It is mainly for this reason that she deserves special treatment, although as a novelist she does not rank with Kamala Markandaya or Anita Desai. Besides, Sahgal's novels span practically the years from the early thirties to the late sixties.

Critic of Anglicized Indians and British Culture

Sahgal is also the one who is most critical of British culture and anglicized Indians. Her American education enabled her to view British culture and its influence on educated Indians more critically than others who were only familiar with two cultures, Indian and British, rather than three. The anti-British stance finds its best expression in *This Time of Morning*.

Weatherly and the Granges represent the old imperialists, Sir Harilal Mathur and Girish are shameless imitators. Sir Arjun Mitra in *This Time of Morning*, according to Kalyan, was a

man guided by other people's conception of India. Among the women novelists, Santha Rama Rau and Nayantara Sahgal are more outspokenly critical of British colonial domination than others. Kamala Markandaya is essentially sympathetic, but she tries impartially to balance the weakness and the strength of her British characters.

Political Tyranny and Male Dominance

Nayantara Sahgal, like Virginia Woolf, recognizes the intrinsic connection between political tyranny and male dominance. But one must also realize that it was not British dominance that brought the suppression of women in India. It was already there in all walks of Indian life with the powerful patriarchal tradition dominating family and community life all over India. It is an age-old problem in the Indian subcontinent. Herbert Marder, in his book, *Feminism and Art*, points out that Virginia Woolf saw them as two sides of the same coin.

The rise of fascism appalled Virginia Woolf. She consistently interpreted this political development in terms of her ideas about the position of women. Thus, when she set out to discuss the causes of the European crisis in *Three Guineas*, it became an exposition of feminist doctrine. Improving the lot of women and opposing tyranny were identified in her mind. The early feminist had been fighting for essentially the same cause, she maintained, as contemporary democrats and anti-fascists (Woolf, Virginia. *Three Guineas*).

Special Context of Indian Women's Struggle

Sahgal however admits that there was no need for Indian women to fight for emancipation like women in Europe and the United States.

Indian women did not have to march in suffragette processions to proclaim their equality with men, or don bloomers in place of their feminine garb. No such measures were necessary. Gandhi's call to women to take part in the national movement beside their men brought them forward as naturally as if they had been born to such a life [...]. In the West, the emancipation of women brought about a change in their appearance. Short skirts and cropped hair became the order of the day. But the appearance of Indian women has on the whole remained unaltered.

They still wear their graceful saris, proving that an efficient job can be done in very feminine - looking attire (*Prison and Chocolate House* 67-68).

A Militant Feminist

This passage reveals Sahgal's general position regarding feminism. Like Virginia Woolf, Sahgal is a militant feminist. "Virginia Woolf's precarious physical and emotional balance did not permit her to take an active part in the feminist movement" (Herbert Marder, *Feminism and Art* 19).

Even though she was largely in sympathy with it, in the case of Sahgal, as she herself concedes, such a struggle was rendered superfluous because of Gandhi's life and work. Nevertheless, she seems to agree with Virginia Woolf that,

The subjugation of women was both cause and symptom of a fundamental imbalance in society [...] Inequality in the home had its counterpart in the political sphere; the problems of the family reflected those of state (*Feminism and Art* 30).

Context of Patriarchal Society

In a patriarchal society, a female child is brought up under the strict control of her parents with a view that she is to be given to a new master, her husband who will determine and shape her for the rest of her life. The traditional feminine virtues and graces are instilled in her, so that she could be an attractive commodity in the marriage market. She is groomed to be an object of sale right from her childhood. She gets hardly any encouragement to develop her independent individual self. The decision in terms of her career or even marriage is taken by her father, brother or mother. As Simone De Beauvoir observes, "Marriage is the destiny traditionally offered to women by society" (*The Second Sex* 445).

Marriage is considered to be the greatest ambition of a girl. As such a woman is always someone's daughter, someone's wife or someone's mother, minus her own identity. The feminists highly resent these culturally constructed norms, which make women subjects of men in various forms. They do not deny the biological differences between male and female, but

there is no reason to presume as men do, that these physical differences make them superior to women. The feminists maintain that a woman is not born but made by the society.

The patriarchal practices reduce women's status to inferior social beings. Such practices are perpetuated by myths and traditions, which unfortunately have been embedded in the fabric of many societies, as we see it so blatantly perpetuated in the Indian society.

According to the V.A. Novarra, the myth related to the role of women in pre-war Britain prescribes that, A mother should devote herself to 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' (*Contemporary Review* 317).

Embodiment of Sacrifice, No Right of Her Own

In India woman is considered to be an embodiment of sacrifice, silent suffering, humility, faith and knowledge. She should be virtuous, chaste, submissive, homely, graceful, and devoted to her husband and family. She must seek pleasure in these relationships. The faintest trace of any idea that every being, "exists primarily for the realization of oneself can never occur to her in the wildest of her dreams" (Akhileswar Jha, *Modernization and Hindu Socio-Culture* 95).

These attitudes illustrate the belief that woman should not have any right of her own, that she has only duties in relation to man. The young women of today are becoming aware of the biased attitude of society. They have started asserting their individuality by challenging the taboos and destructive social norms. Despite some achievements in education, professional and legal fields, they have yet to go a long way for their acceptance as equal beings in the prejudiced society where discrimination is practiced against women right from birth.

Educated Women in Conflict with Patriarchy

Sahgal places her women characters mostly with good educational background, in conflict with a patriarchal society. She depicts their struggle to pop out of their shells. In the

novels taken up for study the focus is mainly on the sufferings of women within marriage. We also get a glimpse of the attempts made to condition their personality along sexist lines before marriage.

In This Time of Morning, Sahgal explores the place of a woman in Indian society before marriage, in the character of Nita. Nita is the young beautiful daughter of Dr. Narang. He is a queer blend of Eastern and Western cultures. In his Western life style, drinks, dance and bridge are part of his culture. But he treats his daughter in the most traditional manner. He imposes severe restrictions on the movement of his ambitious daughter. The Narangs never send their daughter unescorted to parties. Mrs. Narang says: “We don’t allow Nita to go out alone. Her father would not hear of it” (30). The Narangs’s concern for the safety and protection of their daughter illustrates their conformity to traditional values.

Constraints of Traditional Customs

In a traditional society when a young girl reaches puberty, her movements are restricted, whereas there are no restrictions for her brothers at that stage. The double standards start operating more overtly from this stage, binding girls indoors and encouraging boys to develop outdoor activities. A spirit of competition, exploration and challenge is inculcated in boys and they are taught to assert their supremacy over the world in general. Girls, on the contrary, are discouraged from showing aggressive modes of behaviour and, instead, feminine virtues of grace, modesty and self-effacement are frequently demanded from them.

In This time of Morning Nita’s parents would not allow their daughter to smoke, to have drinks or to attend club dances till she gets married.

Marriage as a License

Marriage seems to be a license to do things hitherto prohibited. Mrs. Narang who speaks fluent English and had been a beauty, once has friends who would gather round the card table and discuss marriage plans of their daughters. There is a parade of coffee-drinking, canasta-playing women who streamed through the house of Narang. Nita abhors this “Victorian culture” and only pines for a little latitude, some breathing space.

Nita too has a thirst for doing something, and does not want to be bound by nuptial knots as yet. She requests Rakesh to influence her parents in the matter: “I don’t want to marry at all just yet. Now you’re back, Rakesh, do persuade Mummy and Daddy I should have a job. It’s ghastly doing nothing”. (32) Later her parents do allow her to take up a job, but for a very different reason. Kalyan, a Minister, had offered the job and they simply didn’t have the heart to refuse a Minister’s offer. But Nita looks for something more than merely a job; she strives for independence and her individual identity. She thinks: “a job was never enough [...] A job led to money and freedom, and freedom demanded a flat of one’s own away from the prying eyes and inquisitive voices” (148) of men and women who do not permit women to gratify their basic needs of self-fulfillment.

In Search of Suitable Match

Conforming to these tenets, in an Indian society the effort of most of the parents is to find a suitable match of their choice for their daughters. Nita’s parents also want to settle their daughter in a marriage and wash their hands off her. No importance is given to the wishes of their daughter. They force her to marry the man of their choice whom she neither loves nor admires. Nita’s suitor is an eligible bachelor, rich and pleasant-mannered and she had nothing against him, only she did not want to marry him because she cannot reconcile herself to the fact that Vijay is a stranger “with whom she would spend her life, whose name and children she would bear” (150). However, she fails to assert herself in refusing to marry a man of her parent’s choice and Mrs. Narang is certainly a woman who subscribes to the conventions where women not only accept stereotype images but also pass them on to their children. She also proves to be an oppressive force when she compels her daughter to marry one of those men they introduced to her at parties.

At a party in Rakesh’s house, Nita dances with her fiancé Vijay. Rakesh glancing at the pair says to Saira, “She does not look very happy” (167), to which she replies sarcastically: “She says she doesn’t know him very well. The American girl from U.S.I.S looks at them puzzled. ‘She doesn’t? Why’s she marrying him?’ ‘She’ll know him better after they’re married’, says Saira” (167-168).

Nita feels utterly unhappy and a sense of uneasiness overpowers her when she learns about her parent's decision to marry her off to a stranger. The desire to be her own self leads her to commit an embarrassing mistake when she gets involved with an elderly man, Kalyan. When she first meets him, she stood mesmerized in front of him . She finds a strange comfort in his company and visits him frequently on the pretext of decorating his drawing room. Once she refuses to go home and expresses her love for Kalyan,

Instinct Attempt

Nita's pre-marital involvement is not the result of western liberated life-style; it is an attempt to fulfil her inner desire for love and communication. As Jasbir Jain opines about Nita's sexual involvement with Kalyan,

With Kalyan Sinha, sex comes naturally to her not because he loves her but because she has unconsciously allowed herself to love and admire him and turn to him in her desperation at being hedged in by convention (The Journal of Indian writing in English 42).

Though Nita is engaged, emotionally she is still dependent on Kalyan and often meets him to shower her tenderness on him. She tells him: "You gave me the freedom to be myself. I had never had that before. I'd never have known it but for you", (219) and she finally admits: 'I've been so happy with you' (220). Nita in fact is the product of the dichotomies in her upbringing. On the one hand she is brought up in accordance with much of the liberated life-style, but when the time comes to decide about her marriage, her parents decide her future and she is supposed to submit silently to their wishes.

Exposing Narrow-mindedness

Sahgal seems to expose conventional narrow-minded Indian society through the character of Nita. In Indian society, the parents choose life-partners. The parents arrange for the two young souls to live happily ever after. Sahgal strongly attacks this social convention and names this kind of marriage "just organized rape".

Here Sahgal sounds like the western feminists, favouring new and progressive ideas. Such feminists reject the institution of marriage and motherhood. In fact, she does not reject either of the two. She advocates harmonious relationships and individual liberties in her novels. She also condemns the hypocrisies of the affluent upper classes where women are encouraged to take drinks or to smoke in the name of freedom and modernity. At the same time women are not allowed to take independent decisions in choosing their life partners, and this is what she is objecting to.

If an Indian girl brought up under strict parental control suddenly gets freedom, the result could again be disastrous because of her ignorance or over-protective upbringing that does not allow her to see things for herself. Nita in *This Time of Morning* is striving for independence and dying to get abroad. But there is another character in the same novel, Leela, who succeeds in going to America. She gets a “cultural shock” in an alien society. Finally she commits suicide in desperation. Leela belongs to a modest, unpretentious Hindu family of Banaras. She is studying in Redcliff in America, she gets every freedom, which a young girl like Nita cherishes: lipstick, dancing, smoking and going out with young men. She has taken this at first with the tremulous flutter of a bird just un-caged and later with a soaring delight in every aspect of her new freedom. She gets her lovely long hair cut off in a short swinging bob, yet in their new environment she moves uncertainly as if shrinking from some of the inevitable outcomes of freedom. But then she had been a girl and a sheltered one and Banaras was no preparation for America. Soon she realizes that she is pregnant and drowns herself in a river. Her pregnancy has been an emotional shock for her and out of shame and desperation, she takes this fatal step. Leela could have come out of the difficult situation through medical help and lived a normal life as before. She, however, does not think of ways of escape, because her culture and society did not train her for this kind of situation. In India, normally, young girls are not supposed to know or talk about sex before marriage. Leela fails to strike a balance between the old values and the new found freedom. As a result, she dies. Sahgal is concerned with the question of how far different conventions and traditions imply a fundamental difference in moral outlook; how far an Indian girl could accept western conventions and form western tastes without losing her integrity and independence.

Helpless Victims of the Taboo-Ridden, Conventional Society

Young women in Sahgal's fictional world are the helpless victims of the taboo-ridden, conventional society. Instead of asserting themselves or fighting against the odds, some of them easily accept the role traditionally offered to them, while some others opt for death as the ultimate solution to the mundane man-made problems.

Society has claimed as its victims, young girls like Leela in *This Time of Morning*. They suffer injustice more at the hands of society than from any particular individual. Leela coming as she does from Banaras, the heartland of Hindu civilization and a city of changeless antiquity, meets with disaster in her sudden confrontation with modernity. Women are faced with new situations and problems and are losing their old identity.

Young Leela goes to America and carries with her all the traditional ideas: Reverence for age was a tradition bred into one's bones. An elder was a person you stood up to greet and consulted on all important matters. This was not hypocrisy. It was a way of life. (*This Time of Morning*, 67)

Leela would not wear lipstick in the presence of Kalyan whom she respected. Yet life in America makes it difficult for her to resist them. Leela, finds that the western way of life conflicted with the deep sense of values imbued in her. There is fascination, bewilderment, fear, shame, shock, frustration and finally pregnancy and suicide for Leela. "She does not respect her own individuality and uniqueness [...] adventurous pursuits are leading her into conflict with her own inner nature". (S. Radhakrishnan, *The Hindu view of Life*, 88-89). Sahgal's novels are a mirror to these remarks. Uma's revolt in the same novel springs out of freedom, the malady of affluent women.

In our social setup, the parents of a girl do not act boldly and firmly out of fear of the society. Instead of bringing the guilty ones to law for punishment, they prefer to suppress the matter because they know all too well the hypocrisies of society. Conforming to the social ways, they keep their daughters secure within the four walls of their houses, till they are handed over to their rightful masters.

Sahgal's Position

Sahgal believes in the importance of human relationships based on deep involvement, mutual respect and absolute honesty. These are the humanistic values imbibed from Gandhi - sincerity, tolerance, truthfulness, non-violence - which Sahgal upholds staunchly in her delineation of politics and politicians as well as in her scathing indictment of the institution of marriage as it functions in a patriarchal society like India. In novel after novel, Sahgal gives expression to humanistic values according to which a woman, is not to be taken as, "Sex object and glamour girl [...], lulled into a passive role that requires no individual identity [...]" (The Hindustan Times, iv).

But she is an individual in her own right. Rashmi in *This Time of Morning*, and Simrit in *A Day in Shadow*, we have moving depictions of the new woman struggling to retain her selfhood, to breathe freely in the suffocating environs of loveless, unfulfilling marriages. These women are home-loving women, who merely plead for a respect of their individuality and marriages, which are merely social conveniences, or socially sanctioned means of male domination.

Having personally experienced the trauma of a failed marriage, Sahgal writes deftly, often poignantly, of the dilemma of women trapped between traditional assumptions regarding womanhood and the stirrings of the desire for individuality. Sahgal fulfils a clearly feminist function in her scathing exposure of the hollowness of man-woman relationships based on socially predetermined patterns of gender inequality. The new woman is determined not merely to live, but to live with self-respect, thus implicitly demanding a re-alignment of the parameters on which marriages function. Saroj Simrit is filled with an aching sense of loneliness, and often tempted to retreat to the safe refuge of the unquestioning self. But as Sahgal has commented about the breaking of stereotypes by her woman character:

On Politicians

The politicians are unscrupulous manipulators of the levers of power. In Nayantara Sahgal's view, they are ruthless exploiters of women. They are incapable of having normal relations with women on the basis of mutual love and respect. They hold women in contempt. They regard them as objects of their lust or simply their personal property.

Hari Mohan, the corrupt minister of industries in *This Time of Morning* is such a character. He is a callous womanizer and a totally indifferent husband,

Marriage did not quieten him. The silent spectre of a woman who went about all day with one end of her Sari or pulled low over her face and covered in a corner when he went into their room at night made no change in his life. She was there to be used and he used her, but he paid no more attention to her than if she had been a block of wood. With the years her heavy body swollen with frequent pregnancies, and her animal submissiveness revolted him. He continued to find his excitement in the streets and the brothel in the bazaar where his friends took him.

On one occasion he works his will upon a woman who had come to nurse his wife. The woman looked up enquiringly from the garment she was stitching, then froze in fright as he advanced towards her. But he saw to it that she did not scream or raise an alarm. It was not, according to his lights, rape, it was what one did with a woman.

Hari Mohan is, however, shown to be a very devout Hindu. He regularly bathes in the Ganga, the holy water that cleansed corruption, conferred benediction and promised salvations. He is generous to priests and a believer in astrology. Nevertheless, his goals had always been direct and uncomplicated - the accumulation of money and a woman in his bed. But neither had given him real satisfaction.

Kalyan, too, is incapable of genuine respect and love for the women who come into his life from time to time. He tells Rakesh that he does not attach much importance to the sex act. He exercises, by the force of his personality and his unconventional ways, terrible fascination over the women who are drawn to him like moths to a lighted candle. Barbara, Celia Rand and

Nita each in her turn hopes to ‘Fill his life’ (This Time of morning 59). But he is unable to give himself to them in return; his male ego makes it impossible for him to do so. Celia Rand realizes rather late that love had never entered their relationship, but even their passion had not brought them closer together. Nothing he had ever said or done betrayed that he had a heart, feelings that could be hurt. Encounters that left her bruised and shaken scarcely seemed to touch him at all

Kalyan, an orphan who was snatched out of the jaws of famine by a kind school master, never forgets his days of deprivation. He carries with him, the look of unappeased hunger and endless wandering on his face, the look that the most sumptuous meal, the most abandoned lovemaking did nothing to erase . Kalyan’s hunger for identity and his desire to exercise tyranny over others, stem from the same emotional and spiritual aridity that prevents him from giving himself to the women who fell in love with him. This fundamental imbalance in Kalyan makes him a potentially dangerous leader in a democracy.

Mothers as Authority Figures

Nayantara Sahgal has portrayed mothers as authority figures stifling the daughters in the name of conforming to traditional values. In Sahgal’s *This Time of Morning*, Rashmi’s mother Mira is a patriotic leader’s devoted wife and expects the same from her daughter. When Rashmi announces her failure in marriage, Mira gets shocked and says,

“What reasons under heaven could sever the marriage bond? Women stayed married, had since time immemorial stayed married, under every conceivable circumstance, to brutal insensitive husbands, to lunatics and before [...] if there was suffering, too, it was part of life” (146).

Mira is a typical Indian woman who knows of no acceptable alternative role for herself than that of wife- mother, and for her the “mark of her success as a person is in her living, thriving children” (Alfred D’Souza, *Women in Contemporary India*, x).

Ironically, it is only Rashmi's father who understands her agony and protects her. He supports his daughter to lead a life of her own - a life of self-fulfillment and self-sufficiency. Sahgal in her novels mainly dwells on the problem of women of the educated upper class; hence issues like harassment of poor girls by the in-laws for bringing not enough dowry, or the anxiety of parents about the marriage of their daughters and so on, do not receive Sahgal's attention.

In her novels Sahgal reveals how before marriage women are brought up strictly according to the traditional codes. The moment a girl reaches adolescence, she is reminded of her femininity. The double standards and dichotomous attitude, which continue to operate throughout a woman's life, start right in her parent's home. She is prevented from developing her individuality. She is constantly reminded by her mother that a girl is destined for man and the one who gets the most masculine attention is the luckiest one. A woman in a male-dominated society is thus conditioned into the emotional and cognitive traits of subordination and dependence.

Conclusion

Sahgal insists that a woman needs to throw off much of this conditioning and learn assertiveness, self-confidence, and other such qualities. While some traditional-minded girls accept marriage in order to be free from the parental hold, though under the mistaken notion that marriage will give them freedom. Others like Nita do not accept so quietly the commands of the parents. They look for individual satisfaction and self-realization. Sometimes the revolt is partial as in the case of Nita. Some consider marriage as freedom from parental bondage. Others consider it as way to self-realization. As long as the patriarchal traditional values still prevail in Indian society, there cannot be any freedom or self-realization as many girls seem to expect in marriage. Only the education of women, enlightenment of the mothers of India not to coddle their sons and put down their daughters throughout life, and the uplifting of the women of the poorer classes can ever bring any kind of emancipation of women in India.

=====

Works Cited

- De Beauvoir, Simone. *The second sex*. Trans. and ed. H.M. Parshley. 1953, Rpt
Harmondsworth: Penguin,1983.
- D'Souza, Alfred *Women in Contemporary India*. New Delhi: Manohar, 1977.
- Jain, Jasbir. "The Aesthetics of Morality: Sexual Relations in the Novels of
Nayantara Sahgal", *The Journal of Indian Writing in English*. 6 No.1 Jan 1978.
- Jha, Akhileshwar. *Modernization and the Hindu Socio-Culture*. Delhi: B.R.
Publishing Corporation, 1978.
- Marder, Herbert. *Feminism and Art: A Study of Virginia Woolf*. Chicago: University
of Chicago, 1968.
- Novarra, V.A. "International Women's Year 1975". *Contemporary Review*. 226,
No.1313. June 1975.
- Radhakrishnan S. *The Hindu view of life*. London: George Allen & Unwin, 1927.
- Sahgal Nayantara,
..... *Prison and Chocolate Cake*, 1954 Rpt. Bombay: Jaico,1964.
..... *This Time of Morning*. Delhi: Hind Pocket Books, 1970.
..... Of Divorce and Hindu Woman. The Hindustan Times. 18 Dec 1971.
- Woolf, Virginia. *Three Guineas*. London: The Hogarth Press. 1968.

=====
M. Selvanayaki, M.A., M.Ed., M.Phil.
No 95 AMC Road
Opposite SP Camp Office
Round Road
Dindigul 624005
Tamilnadu
India
selvimaniparan@gmail.com