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A Feminist Study of Nayantara Sahgal Fiction

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As a writer with feminist concerns, Nayantara Sahgal is a Progeny of the tradition where in power itself is deified as goddess “Sakti” a female symbol. Her novels seek to posit the independent existence of women and atrophy all attempts to preclude them from the centre-stage of human existence. The attempts to attenuate women-power have been condemned by a number of writers in recent Indian English fiction, but weapons do differ. Sahgal’s approach towards the issue is holistic and focuses mainly on the question of identity-crisis for women. She believes :

Through the rewriting women do, new sitas and savitris will arise, stripped of false sanctity and crowned with the human virtue of courage. Then at last we will know why they did what they did, and how their lone, remote struggles can help our search for identity and emancipation. Her novels from A Time to be Happy to Mistaken Identity show her deep concern with the parlous state of women in the parochial society. Her women from her prototype Maya to the mother figure ranee in Mistaken Identity, rise against the stultifying culture which impedes women 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 and considers the very issue of identity crises as preposterous apropos women. Betty friedan noted the women could never ask question like who am i? And what do I want? friedan declared:

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For women as for men, the need for fulfilment, autonomy, self relation , independence , individuality , self actualisation is as important as the sexual need , which is serious consequences when it is thwarted.(Fridan 1971:9) Sahgal’s first two women Maya and Rashmi are still women in statis but the next three protagonists of Sahgal-namely Saroj, Simrit and Devi-mark a clear advancement from the point of view of self-determination. Despite all their initial hesitance, when Saroj and Simrit brake 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”. Maya and Rashmi are product of a parochial society where women are so conditioned that it is not without a sence of guilt that they pursue their goals away from their home. Sahgal does not subscribe to this approach. She declares: “It takes half of life to achieve personhood but there is no greater glory” (Sahgal 1997-30) In her last three novels we come across women who disseminate the concept of freedom and self-realisation and more importantly they do so with out the supporting crutches of their male friends, Sonali



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Ranade, Anna Hansen and the nameless but certainly not faceless ranees of Vijaygarh, dare to differ from the Patriarchal society. They refuse to abide by the fossilized concept of male-supremacy and seek to deflate male superiority successfully unaided by a man. In a male-dominated society those women hoist the flag of gender-equality and seek *carte blanche* for their race.

In 'Rich Like Us', especially in the portrayal of Sonali Ranade, we notice the feminist in 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 for the stranglehold of men, right from the beginning. They are mistresses of indomitable spirit. Sonali grows up with a dream to fulfil "a new tradition to create her independent worth to prove". An uncompromising, administrative officer, she refuses to pretend that "the emperor's new clothes were beautiful". Her survival instinct is strong and instead of giving in, she gives up. Her registration is not her acceptance of defeat, it is rather her defiance against oppressive force, her refusal to cringe before forces acting against her identity. It is her unique manner of asserting her individuality. The thirst for identity is not a problem facing the Indian women only. Anna Hansen of *Plans for Departure* is a Danish woman, free from the shackles that women in a parochial society face, yet she comes to India when she wants to "break out" and be herself, she is despaired to think of her epitaph as ".

Here lies Anna, beloved wife, who died without having made much effort to live, and nobody noticed the difference, since being a beloved wife was supposed to be reward enough. (sahgal1987:62). Her zeal for emancipation forces her to leave the warm embraces not only of home but also of a country. She'd rather face hostilities in a foreign land than be a slave in her own surroundings, to her own people. Jasbir Jain aptly observes: "Anna's travels are part of her quest for freedom and meaning". Here is a woman whose visions of self-assertion are not clouded by conventions. She knows not only what she wants but also how to achieve it.

The "Power Politics" is always working as motive in the relation of man and woman" reducing the status of a woman to merely a utility item, an object for decoration, for possession and for man's sexual gratification" (Arora 1991-68). In her article, "Women's Liberation: The Indian Way," Sahgal recognises "Women Power" but laments that Indian society has still not accepted this notion. Ours is a patriarchal society, where personality is a luxury for women. The need of the times is:



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A whole new look at woman” not as the property of father, husband or son, and dependent on their bounty but as valuable human material to be brought to full flower and full participation in her life and events. (Sahhgall1971-6)

Shagal’s concept of emancipation reaches its culmination duly and justly in her last novel “Mistaken Identity” here we meet a women who is out an out a rebel . The ranee of vijaygarh defies all moulds and definitions. She is a class apart. She brakes all boundaries and makes her own rules. Talking to Jasbir jain , Shagal says: “She had been through agony and had no life- But her mind was free and she, you know, leaved her life.” Sahgal’s other young so called emancipated women need to learn a lesson or two from there successor the ranee though she belongs to an age when women were expected to stay behind veil. The women is herself confined in multiple chains. First, there is he hierarchy, then there is her wifhood to a Raja, and then again there is the veil behind which she is doomed to choke. This women shines in the firmament of Shagal’s fiction as the pole star, the brightest and the most firm. Here is a woman who is living in 1920-30s, is uneducated, rather illiterate, has an apathetic husband, has nothing to look forward to, and yet she dares to shun her husband to her life, when she discovers the men has no respect for other kind. There are no outside forces which make her aware of this (like Vishal and Saroj),there is no one to support her in her crusade against female exploitation(Raj and Simrit), and yet she dares to challenge the aauthority of her husband in his own home. Exhibiting exemplary strength of character the women behind the veil breaks all ties with her husband, when he marries for the third time. Though she knows nothing about women’s liberation, she becomes a strong practitioner of the same because whatever measures she takes to insulate herself respect from tyrannical forces she does show with the support of anyone else. It is her inherent courage, her strength, her own will power. This she does not owe to any Vishal , Raj , Usman.

This unrelenting soul, prostrates before the deities to procure a child not because he considers it essential for heirarchy but because she want to express herself through it. Her pining for a child is symbolic of her search of identity. It’s not as wife or as a mother that she is satisfied she has to survive as a person. Even her fascination with superhuman powers sadhus and occults is an expression of her preoccupation with emancipation. Power in all form is welcome because power rules the roost. When in the end she breaks free from all inhabitions and marries comrade Yusuf, it is without any infesting sense of guilt that she does so. her marrage to comrade Yusuf, then, is not an effort to seek refuge from the evils that Raja has subjected



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her to. Such refuge, she does not ask for. This woman does not need support even from her son Bhusan. She walks her own proud way even when there is no comrade Yusuf in her life. Sahgal shows a steady evolution in the course of her writing career. Rane of vijaygarh, though her nameless character, marks the culmination of the

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onward march of Sahgal's new women towards freedom. Anna Hansen, of *Planes for Departure* is a free woman no doubt, but given the environs and conditions. Rane of Vijaygarh is non pareil in her spirit of defiance and propensity to assert. This woman may well compete with other feminist characters on the scene.

Sahgal, though not a militant feminist, feels strongly about female exploitation and male sarcasm toward the issue of women's identity crises. She demands social justice for women, her focus being on freedom. Sahgal's fictional women challenge the moth-eaten pretence of tradition without suffering from loss of identity: "on the contrary they seem to gain or acquire some kind of individuality. (Talwar 1997:103). They threaten the stranglehold of men and reaffirm their faith in their potentials. The battle that starts quit demurely with Maya keeps advancing and gathering and momentum through Rashmi, saroj, Simrit and Devi and In Sonali it reaches its culmination. Anna and the ranees take it to its glorious heights. Shree Rasmi Talwar's suggestion seems to over look the powerfull presence of the ranees:

'It may be desirable for women writers in the future to portray a women who does not adhere to or follow any model but is herself and is initiated in to a search to discover her deeper identity.

This is precisely what Sahgal's hitherto last creation the ranees does. In her person the concept of women's quest for identity reaches its zenith and we have good reasons to believe that sahgal give us another novel the female protagonist therein would certainly be unparalleled in her self determination and self assertion. Talwar's observation : ".....from the vantage point of the 21 st century, Sahgal's pioneering quest for women's emancipation will, no doubt be a momentous literary document of the present era. (Ibbid)seems the most apt peroration of the issue.



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