



# Post-Modern Feminist Ideology in Nayantara Sahgal Select Novels-A Critical Study



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**Submission:** September 08, 2018; **Published:** November 02, 2018

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## Abstract

Literature is the mirror of life as a statement which reflects of the society and the characters are the images of writers. The novels of Kiran Desai and Anita Desai deals with the men and women, specifically women struggling against oppression and injustice heaped upon them in the name of tradition and culture. This paper has been discussing about Nayantara Sahgal novels here it portrays the inalienable right of the characters in her novels. As a writer with feminist concerns, Nayantara Sahgal is a progeny of the tradition where in power it is defined as goddess 'Saki' a female symbol. Her fictional world is busy by political leaders, business tycoons, foreign advisors, upper class people, journalists and highly qualified persons like ambassadors and ministers. A political theme is often combined to the theme of man-woman relationship their marital problems, their temperamental incompatibility and the problems arising out of their submissiveness and finally the place of a woman in Indian society when she opts to dissolve a seventeen years old marriage.

A divorced woman is stigmatized forever, and she is curiously watched by others as if divorce where "a disease that left pock marks". Nayantara's main concern is with self-expression within marriage. She describes marriage as a "life-long damage" if the other partner is not sensitive enough to communicate. Marriage is the unwritten law of most societies and very few do not subscribe to in the postmodern world. Sahgal presents couples from three generations and details their antithetical relationships in postmodern feminism.

**Keywords:** Postmodernism; Feminism; Women struggling; Oppression; Injustice

## Introduction

The motive of feminist movement strives towards the aim that women should have the same rights and opportunities as men. Though feminism is not a relatively new concept and has always formed part of the women's liberation movement, its emphasis has been changing, in form and content with gender equality being one of the aspects. There is no doubt that feminism is today a major accepted fact of modern life with women competing with men in all walks of life, and even doing better than them in some areas. Women's liberation was not merely an endeavor to obtain rights and privileges but the seeking after opportunities to show that though they may be called "the second sex" (the title of Simone de Beauvoir's book). They are generally not treated on a par with men in all respects of human activity. Whether working in the fields or operating women lag men in any sphere.

Over the years, there has been a positive change in the standpoint of feminism towards humanism. Simone de Beauvoir has set the ball rolling when she explained the relationship of feminism with humanism in a frank, concise manner. The crux and thrust of The Second Sex are based on the emphasis that women should be considered as basic human beings. To her, the expression of women and their status seemed discriminatory, with

them being denied the right to be identified as separate entities as such and prevented from choosing their own destiny[1].

Nayantara Sahgal is one of the great Indian women novelists writing in English. She began writing since her childhood and became a professional writer in the post-Independence years. Her novels deal with men and women, especially women struggling against oppression and injustice heaped upon them in the name of tradition and culture. Nayantara was born on May 10, 1927 to Ranjit Sitaram Pandit and Vijayalakshmi Pandit as the second of their three daughters. She lived as a child in Anand Bhavan, a large 3 aristocratic home of Motilal Nehru, a flourishing lawyer in Allahabad along with her parents and with her Marnu (uncle) Jawaharlal Nehru (later to become Prime Minister of India) and her cousin Indira Gandhi (she also became the Prime Minister, after Nehru). Nayantara's father Ranjit Pandit was a Maharashtrian, a lawyer by profession, erudite, and a scholar, well versed in many languages including Sanskrit. He was a man of abundant love and understanding with a healthy zest for life, indulgent toward his child Nayantara.

He gave up his lucrative profession answering the call of Mahatma Gandhi and entered whole heartedly in the non-

cooperative movement against the British regime. He inculcated the literary fervour and noble sentiments of patriotism and an unbending will to fight against injustice and oppression. Jawaharlal Nehru, attracted by the ideals of Gandhiji, involved himself in the struggle for Independence. His father, Motilal Nehru followed the example of his beloved son, espoused Gandhian ideals, eschewed the life of luxury to which he had been accustomed. Anand Bhavan was the meeting place for the great leaders of political movement including Gandhi himself. Nurtured in such a congenial atmosphere for the flowering of an independent spirit the young Nayantara imbibed the spirit of independence with great vigour.

Nayantara believes that it is not a serious moral offence in a woman to break away from the "sacred" marriage bond, if she finds the shackles too oppressive to the growth of her inner self. She finds that a woman's duty to be sincere to her inner self is far greater and urgent than to be for her family and society. Nayantara portrays the inalienable right of freedom in women in many of the characters in her novels, such as Simrit in *Storm in Chandigarh*, Saroj in *The Day in Shadow* and Rashmi in *Rich Like Us*.

Nayantara Sahgal has in fact introduced a considerable number of autobiographical elements in her novels. To a question, she asserts that "all art is autographical". Her work ranges from factual and emotional autobiography to fictionalized autobiography. In her address to Colloquium at Radcliff Institute (America) she confesses the close links between her own experiences and that of some of the leading characters in her novels. She describes succinctly in an article as to how she grew up moulded by congenial circumstances, she says: I grew up during the National Movement. My parents went to jail repeatedly during our fight for freedom. My father died because of his last imprisonment released too late to be cured of the serious illness contracted in jail. My uncle became our first Prime Minister. I was born and brought up within the atmosphere and hopes and ideals of the Congress Party.

Its leaders were familiar to me. Our home was their meeting place and many decisions momentous to India were taken in it. I became a novelist and a political journalist, and all my writings, fiction and non-fiction, has been about contemporary India. (*Voice for Freedom* 55). This *Time of Morning* is another novel, which she completed in Kashmir in 1965[2]. *The Day in Shadow* was published in February 1971. This novel, acclaimed to be the best by most of her critics, describes her attitudes to marriage and the condition of women in general. She wrote an article "Of Divorce and Hindu Women" in *The Hindustan Times* (Dec, 18, 1971), which is an example of her liberal and permissive outlook: She stands for new morality according to which a woman is not to be taken as a mere toy, an object of lust and momentary pleasure, but man's equal and honoured partner, in word and deed, as against the inhuman tradition postures (18).

*Prison and Chocolate Cake* (1958) and *From Fear Set Free* (1962) are autobiographical in which she has given a graphic account of her experiences during the freedom struggle which naturally were responsible in moulding her as a writer. *A Time*

to be Happy (1958). *A Situation in New Delhi* (1977) and *Storm in Chandigarh* (1969) are classed as her political novels. *Rich Like Us* published in 1985, uses Emergency as its backdrop and the theme is about freedom. She won a Fellowship of Woodrow Wilson International Centre, Washington DC for writing it. Sahgal herself has adjudged this novel as her best. *Plans for Departure* (1986) is an interesting novel in which a foreigner Anna Hansen visits India, takes up an in-depth study of Hindu customs and behaviour and passes dispassionate judgments. *Mistaken identity* (1988), a historical novel, is the story of Bhushan Singh, the only son of a feudal raja of Vijaygarh, a kingdom of one hundred villages in the Gangetic Plain. Set during the years 1929-32, this novel is a satire on the role of the raja or the British. As it mainly deals with rajah and has no relevance for the present study, this novel has not been included in the thesis. Her latest work, *Lesser Breeds*, was published in 2003, is not included in this present study simply because of its irrelevant concept regarding this research work.

The present paper is the result of my hard work and dedication. It mainly focuses on Feminism in the of Nayantara Sahgal. Though She works on various themes but here concerns are the pathetic condition of women in the patriarchal society. Nayantara Sahgal's leanings towards feminism even though mild, are quite marked in her novels *Storm in Chandigarh* and *A Situation in New Delhi*. The fact comes and to light when one studies the underserved ill-treatment many her women characters in these novels must undergo in the society and tries to know. Why they are driven to committing suicide or to seeking divorce, or to undergoing torments defenselessly when it becomes unavoidable. The women character who is driven to committing suicide is Madhu in *A Situation in New Delhi*. The society that Nayantara creates in *A Situation in New Delhi* is one which fails to protect women even on the university campus in the capital city of the country as here Madhu a student of Delhi University is raped in the Registrar's office[2].

The boys who rape Madhu clearly consider Madhu only as an object of lust to be used at their disposal and have no regard for her feelings will and self-respect. A society which produces such men and cannot punish them does not deserve to have women in it. One may raise an objection and argue that the whole society should not be disparaged for what three boys do, because if this society has produced these three boys it has also produced Usman Ali the Vice-Chancellor, who only expels the three guilty boys but6 also braves a physical assault and finally resigns as Vice Chancellor in the order to organize people against fights the forces responsible for the rape of the girls, but the fact remains that his efforts bear little fruits and at last, the girl realizes that even her brother would be thankful when he was relieved the responsibility of her" and commits suicide in a state of helplessness by immolating herself. So, it is obvious that this society has failed to create conditions in which women feel themselves safe and out of the reach of immoral men.

The women characters who have opted to move out of the conjugal walls to escape ill-treatment are Saroj in *Storm in*

Chandigarh, and Lydia and Nell in A Situation in New Delhi. Saroj's husband under ill-treats his wife chiefly for her having lost her virginity before her marriage as is evident from the following piece of conversation between him and his wife: "Well why did do it? That" I keep coming back to why did You do it?" "I was fond of him," she said wearily "and I was curious. Is that a crime?" "Good God. Didn't you have Any inhibitions, any Sense of modesty? Couldn't your curiosity Wait till you got married" (23). Nayantara Sahgal has a central woman character that gradually moves towards an awareness of her emotional needs.

Nayantara Sahgal's novel reads like commentaries on the political and social turmoil that India has been facing since independence. Mrs. Sahgal's feelings for politics and her command over English are rather more impressive than her art as a novelist. She is a novelist as well as a successful political columnist for different newspapers. Her writing is generally characterized by simplicity and boldness. Her writing abounds the latest political ups and downs with a tinge of western liberalism. Her novels portray the contemporary incidents and political realities saturated with artistic and objectivity. All her major characters of the novel are drawn towards the vortex of politics [3]. Besides politics, her fiction also focuses attention on Indian woman's search for sexual freedom and self-realization. As a women novelist, Sahgal recognizes that her primary obligation is that of advocating the emancipation of women. She has probed deep into the female psyche in her novels. She describes in her novel how women exploited even during the modern times by both the individuals and the society. She tried to Portray the sensibility of woman that how a woman looks at herself and her problems [4]. She considers her novels political in content and intention and in her view, each of the novels her contemporary reflects and political era.

The use of the fictional genre is one of the main aspects of her novels, wherein she can explore the problems of women in contemporary society. Though Sahgal has been hailed chiefly as a political novelist, her feminist concern is obvious and her fighter spirit quite vocal in her fiction. In all her works, there is juxtaposition of two worlds: the personal world of man-woman relationship and the impersonal world of politics. The portrayal of her memorable women characters and the feminist tone in her fictional discourse make Nayantara Sahgal one of the most outstanding feminist Indian novelists writing in English [5].

Nayantara Sahgal is not only a novelist of repute but also a journalist by profession. She confesses that fiction is her "abiding love" journalism her "conscience". Talking to Ram Jha in 1987, Sahgal said that her two kinds of writing experiences-that of a novelist and that of a political journalist-though contrary to each other, are mutually sustained because, her central focus in both areas in the same-the concept of freedom in human beings, national and personal and her increasingly feminist concerns. Most of her characters belong to the affluent upper class, she does not caste-ridden middle class or the poor Indian village just to

conform to the accepted image of India. Her range of characters simplifies her technique. She does not have to struggle to present Indian conversation in English as most of her characters are the kind of people who would talk and think in English in real life [6].

Storm in Chandigarh is Mrs. Sahgal's third novel written after A Time to be Happy and This Time of Morning. It deals with complex human relationships in which love, friendship, honesty, freedom and equality play a vital role. The 'Storm' in the lives of three married couples, Inder and Saroj, Jit and Mara, Vishal and Leela is portrayed against the political backdrop of the storm or confrontation between the newly divided states of Punjab and Haryana over the issues of Chandigarh and Bakhra Nangal territory act...Gyan Singh, the ambitious Chief Minister of Punjab has announced a strike in the whole region for the selfish purpose of demonstrating his political strength. He is only concerned with his personal gains and does not even hesitate to use violence as a means for achieving his selfish ends. While Harpal Singh, the Chief Minister of Haryana acts as political counter oil of Gyan Singh as he is a behavior of Gandhi an ideology of non-violence. He has always given priority to the interests of people against his self-interest[7].

The union Home Minister is assigned the task of affecting a rapprochement between the two warring states of Vishal Dubey, an honest and promising central officer. Dubey goes to Chandigarh from Delhi to solve the political impasse but unwillingly involves himself in the private lives of the estranged husbands and wives especially those of Saroj and Inder [8,9].

Nayantara Sahgal's contribution about treatment of themes is enormous and varied. She dwells upon contemporary events in her novels like Storm in Chandigarh, Rich Like us and A Situation in New Delhi. Her novels Plans for Departure and Mistaken Identity were a creative vision towards the happenings of India before Independence. The influence of Nehru and Gandhi on Sahgal is clear and she has offered a fresh insight into Gandhism, Nehruism and their impact on the evolution and progress of India. A.V. Krishna Rao [9] succinctly states: "Nayantara Sahgal has inherited and cherished a certain set of values and attitudes towards like which can be best described as a complex of political liberalism, social sophistication, economic moderation and cultural catholicity in continual interaction with the Gandhian idealism" (44).

Nayantara Sahgal's Storm in Chandigarh depicts the suffering of marital friction apart from the political and social ups and downs. It narrates the life of Inder and Saroj. Sahgal pens the suffocating experience of marriage for both the partners. Most importantly, the writer highlights those wrong features in marriage which causes separation. Sahgal, in this novel, deals with marital as well as political crisis. Division in political front and friction in marital relationships are the main themes of the novel. Duality and deceptiveness are prevalent in politics and marriage. In this novel character come close to each other but without any emotional attachment and sincerity. There is no sensitiveness or loyalty in their relationship; It seems a temporary bond[10].

In the novel *Storm in Chandigarh* Sahgal narrates how the attitude of dictatorship destroys harmony of marital status. Marriage which strongly needs love and faith of both the partners, can breakdown also in presence of doubt and frustration. The main protagonist of the novel Saroj has committed mistake before marriage. She has her first sexual encounter with one of her friends before marriage. When Inder came to know that, he started tormenting his wife physically as well as mentally. However, Inder himself indulges in an extra marital affair with Mara.

Love and satisfaction are not much prevalent in this affair also. Basically, Inder is a character who always denies individuality of women. He considers woman as a parasite; who could survive only with the support of a male figure. Here the writer portrays the pathetic plight of Saroj who tries to show her love and affection towards her husband but in vain. Throughout their lives, Vishal and Leela remained strangers to each other. He is possessed by a deep sense of guilt for living with her without love and his relationship with Leela abruptly ends due to her death. Vishal's marriage had been a failure [11,12].

Being a widower, he is deriving satisfaction in a connection with Gauri, a Bengali businessman's wife who finds security in arranged marriage but who needs and establishes a relationship with Dubey which is based only on sex. Nayantara Sahgal is quite bold in her political approach. She dismantles the age-old notions of women being inferior. She is one novelist who is clear in her perception that man-woman relationship should be based on equality, understanding and love. Man-woman relationship without love is prostitution and nothing else [13].

### Conclusion

Among the women novelists of Indian Writing in English, Nayantara Sahgal emerges as a powerful voice to challenge and question the "received" versions of history. She not only calls the officially-ordered 'histories' into question but also exposes the male-dominated and patriarchal power-structures behind them. By delineating India's history and politics in her fictional narratives, she creates an alternative discourse to subvert them

and thereby construct her own writer-specific version. She achieves this purpose by using the various narrative techniques and devices and puts them side by side with the official discourse. Sahgal's fiction also centers on the political history of India and how it has affected the perceptions of ordinary men and women. Her main interest, however, remains to raise the questions of women and so the basic purpose of envisioning India's history in her fiction rests on her concerns with the social and individual problems of women and their search for identity. Sahgal herself has overcome her problem of identity-crisis through her writing.

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DOI: [10.19080/ASM.2018.02.555583](https://doi.org/10.19080/ASM.2018.02.555583)

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