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Modern Concept of Marriage : Nayantara Sahgal



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Abstract

This present paper attempts to explain, women in India are on the top of every field which is the result of increasing education and reaching of its approach towards the common man. Women are considered more powerful making their decision, living a free life with changed mentality and engaging themselves purely and honestly in their household duties too. Marriage is the deepest as well as the most problematic of all human relations. As most of the modern societies are patriarchies, 'Marriage is the destiny traditionally offered to woman by society'. The wives duties and obligations towards her husbands were of utmost importance in the 18th century. The struggle for the emancipation of woman coincides with the struggle for independence and in fact both of them are offshoots of Renaissance in India.

Keywords : Women psyche, Isolation , Liberalism, Feminist approach, marriage, status, suppression, gender role.

Research Paper

Introduction :

Nayantara Sahgal is a prolific writer and her literary canon consists of eight novels, two autobiographies, some fictional works. Several articles and short stories of her have been published in leading newspapers and magazines. The present paper deals a historical survey of the subordinate position of women and this exploitation in various ways. It also studies the genesis and different stages and strands of Women's Liberation Movement and how it has affected the ethos, literature and criticism in our time. In her earlier works, Nayantara Sahgal depicts marriage as an emotionally stifling and tyrannical institution for women. Most of her characters like Rose, Sonali, Simrit, and Nishi are victims of gender-oppression. Marriage for a man who "Takes her," means enlargement of his existence. He enjoys both the worlds: of home and of career. It permits him progression and self advancement. Marriage is the deepest as well as the most problematic of all human relations. Sociologists define it as "Cultural phenomenon which sanctions a more or less permanent union between partners conferring legitimacy on their offspring."

Religiously marriage is supposed to be the holy union of two souls and bodies. In Christianity, the first parents were made "bone of one bone and flesh of one flesh." In marriage, oneness, companionship and mutuality are stressed, and it is assumed that the interests of the husband and wife are one, that whatever is for the benefit of the one is for the benefit of the other also. Despite these idealized concepts of marriage, woman in reality is essentially a subservient partner in marriage. Marriage often does not mean companionship or equality for her, rather it is a trap which negates her rights to individuality, independence and self-realization. She is subjugated, marginalized and sidelined and usually her position is no better than the poor, oppressed and racial minorities like the blacks. The "power politics," to use a phrase from Kate Millett, operates in a subtle manner in the institution of marriage, reducing the status of a woman to merely a "utility item," an object for decoration, for possession and for man's sexual gratification. Marriage turns out to be an institution of oppression for her in various forms rather than of her protection for which it was primarily instituted. Sahgal delineate with keen perception and sensitivity the problems and sufferings of women in marriage, who feel entrapped, oppressed and doomed to the care of husband and home, and show their reaction to it in their novels. Some of their women accept their fate unhesitatingly, but most of them gasp for freedom, and gradually reject the stereotype by going in for separation or for divorce to live a meaningful life. However, in the ultimate

analysis Sahgal find that the tradition of family is very strong, and thus make a strong plea for the preservation of it, by inviting men to involve themselves in it.

Main study:

The main theme of her novels in the expression of pathetic condition of the women in the male dominated society, which is the blot on the society. In the society the women are considered as a daughter, wife, sister ,mother ,she is also considered as “**Maa**” in the scripture but still in the modern age she is suppressed ,exploited and counted as the servant of the male. This discrimination is minutely observed and expressed by **Nayantara Sahgal** in her novels. She exhibited the pathetic condition in the society. As a modern woman, she rebels against the traditional society and her husband. She is humiliated in the hands of her husband Som. Because of all these reasons, she seeks divorce from him in a drastic moment. One can say that Simrit is an awakened woman of modern age who shows courage to live in this world. But she does not get any peace of mind after the divorce and it is a trait in her that makes her to feel like Rashmi in *This Time of Morning*. She feels that *in some inescapable way and part of her would always be married to Som.*(TDS : 220) She thinks that it is

painful how the connection continued, like a detached heartbeat. The tissue of a marriage could be dissolved by human acts, but its anatomy went on and on. And skeletons could endure for a million years. Just living together, daily routine produced that uncanny durability. It made the question of whether one had loved or not, been loved or not, been the transgressor or transgressed against, comparison. (TDS : 64)

Like the marriage of Vishal in *Storm in Chandigarh*, Simrit’s marriage also turns out to be ‘a vanishing search for communication, though she marries Som out of love. She has done all that she can, to save the marriage, but in vain. Som cuts her off easily, when she cannot respond sensitively to her needs. (M.Narendra:70). Thus, one can observe that an Indian woman may become modern, but she can never go away from the old traditions and customs of her own country. Through Simrit, Sahgal expounds various aspects of divorce and its implications for a lonely woman. Simrit soon realizes that it is basically a ‘*husband-centered world* (TDS:2), where a free woman has no place. Out of this struggle to be free is born a new Simrit—a person who makes choices, takes decisions and becomes aware of herself as a person. First the mind, then the body open up to new response and life affirms itself in a new sense of fulfilment in her relationship with Raj which is an involving and an equaling one. Discussing Sahgal’s works, Jasbir Jain aptly observes:

Marriage is neither a system of slavery nor an escape route. It is not even contract-or it is wrong to approach it in that spirit. It is a partnership based on respect and consideration and requiring involvement from both. (Jasbir Jain : 60)

The distress that the woman feels after divorce and alienation in Indian society springs directly from the existential predicament Nayantara Sahgal candidly analyses in her marriage:

For the first time I came across the shocking assumption of inequality, A man's ego and ambition, I learned, must be served first. In case of conflict, the man's will and desire must prevail --- I was of a personality and an environment whose goals and texture were different from anything had known or been comfortable with. (Nayantara Sahgal : 15).

Simrit she wrote *is the most interesting heroine for her passivity*. i.e. quite a lesson for the yuppie generation which believes in aggressive approach to life. Simrit is a passive yet not a weak heroine. She has a kind of strength out of her passivity. It had not struck me till it was out to me. (*Nayantara Sahgal:68*) Simrit appears as a *free* woman who has the courage to break a long marital-bond between husband and wife. She decides to divorce when another male partner is waiting for her outside marriage. She boldly leaves the sheltered world of Som not to live a life of her own, but lead a happy life under the shadow of another man. She verily does not have to fight alone for survival, neither at the financial level nor at the emotional one which leaves woman even more alienated and traumatic. In her divorce settlement, *Brij* (her son) alone acquires five lakhs out of six lakhs, a lion- share transferred to Simrit. Besides, Som assures Brij to send him abroad for studies. *Brij* on his part never tries to blink Som's promise even if that means the amount of pain and pangs to his mother. Now Simrit gets satiation in the company of Raj who has been her sole sympathizer all along. In spite of some feminine sentiments expressed by Raj now and then, his total behaviour only reinforces the Patriarchal myth of male chauvinism over woman. He is concerned about Simrit at times: *First it had been her husband. Next it would be her children. Women for use had been the rule too long.* (*TDS :38*) Rakesh in *This Time of Morning*, Raj in *The Day in Shadow* as one critic observes, these *men are strikingly similar – intelligent, articulate, compassionate, committed to preserving the values of justice and moderation.* (*Marcia:51*) Here Raj pays respect to Simrit's liberty and individuality *She didn't need a man for identity or status.* Sahgal's idea of modern marriage in her novels presents a contrast to the traditional marriage. As in traditional marriage a woman is a passive, submissive sex object to a man and confirms the stereotyped role of woman in Indian society. But in modern concept of marriage the young women don't conform the role of stereotyped woman they

reject this role of woman, who makes them a slave to the husband not an equal partner to him. These young woman make a bid to liberate themselves from male oppression and thus cherish the ideals of self reliance and self-sufficiency. The woman of today relieves herself from ancient grooves and bonds and that long time suppression. So this is the notion of modern marriage that girls don't say yes and a man to everything he proposes. They are aware of their position in marriage. They think if they blindly follow their husbands in marriage they will finish up by not being allowed to breathe unless they give them permission. They see marriage is a matter of the heart and intellectualizing and analyzing and rationalise their unhappiness. It is well known about Indian society that it is the marriage orientated, one implication of which is that a woman should seek fulfillment within the parameters of marriage. Woman as such is not as much important in our society as the woman as a mother who surrenders her individuality to an inimical system for the husband and the children.

In the novels of Nayantara Sahgal we find that women characters mostly with good education background in conflict with a patriarchal society and depict their struggle to pop out of their shells. It is because of much of imbroglia and chaos in a patriarchal society issues from the misconstrued implications of man-woman relationship in marriage, which as a socio-cultural phenomenon is emptied of its sacramental value if it is exploited by man as a power dividing device in a bid to justify his male hegemony. The marital discord comes from the dualism of the moral code which man has evolved in course of history to seek self-gratification and impose upon his womenfolk the compulsion of surrender and effacement of their individuality as human beings. Sahgal herself states :

"The new woman does the opposite. No more sati, she is determined to live, and to live in self-respect. Her virtue is courage, which is a willingness to risk the unknown and to face the consequences."

In Sahgal's novels modern marriage is not a sacrament, it is beyond caste, creed and race. It is based on love, mutual understanding and defies the traditional concept of marriage that is arranged by parents in the same caste. So marriage in the modern society is fixed by woman of her choice' man and not by God as it was thought in the traditional Indian society. This modern marriage works in the marriage of Simrit and Som in the novel *The Day in Shadow*. Simrit doesn't believe in arranged marriage by her parents and she marries with Som, a businessman, against the will of her Brahmin parents. Although, Simrit is a Brahmin girl and Som is Punjabi, the caste of both is not same but still she gets married to him for she loves him deeply. Thus she defies the traditional marriage in Indian society that takes place in the same caste. Because she sees her complete happiness with Som. That's why she marries with

him and gets satisfaction in her marriage that is arranged by her. But after sometime, when she gets disillusionment with Som she remains unhappy with him and ultimately takes divorce from her husband even after seventeen years of her married life. After from divorce she plans to marry Raj, who is a converted Christian. Her decision to marry with Raj for the second time shows her rejection of caste and religion factor completely that works in a traditional marriage and confirms the modern outlook of marriage that depends on love and proper harmony between partners. So in this way she defies all the norms, conventions and customs of a traditional marriage. Through centuries the concept of ideal womanhood has been based on mythical personages like Sita, Nalayani. A woman was expected to be under the care of a male throughout her life. One section that has made a great impact is that which disallows any freedom for women, is as follows:

Pitaarakshatikaumaree, bhartharakshat

Putroorakshativardhakyee, nastri

Swathantharyamarhati (ix, 3)

(Women and her family, 2) ('The father protects the woman during childhood, the husband during her youth and the son during her old age. A woman does not deserve freedom'). A woman is therefore inculcated with the ideals of martyrdom, of pride in patience, of the need to accept a lower status through the mythical models of Sita, Savithri, Gandhari etc. The dialogue between Ram and Rose in the novel 'The Rich Like Us' is introduced to bring to light the condition of women generally prevailing in Society. Another evil perpetrated in the society is the male prerogative over female issues. Women are considered as commodities, greater the number, greater the convenience. Men do not bother about the emotional Constraints, which they impose upon women. Women have to put up with such inconveniences on economic considerations. When Ram describes Draupdi was gambled away by her five husbands, Rose is literally shocked. Sahgal approaches the problem of women with responsibility, maturity and understanding. she is aware of the fact that women's problems are not confined to women only. society consists of men and woman and the happiness of one or the other depends upon a co-operative endeavour. Women cannot be antagonistic towards men as they cannot be so without peril. The responsibility of bringing about a happy society rests equally on men and women in the society. Sahgal understands the need for a spirit of co-operation on the part of men. It is the duty of the educated, responsible men in society to help in the emancipation of women. Sahgal brings out this point clearly when she makes her heroines in the novels dependent on the responsible men in society Simrit is helped and guided by Raj in every way. It is Raj who tries to break the spirit of

passivity in Simrit and make her take some positive action. Under his control, paradoxically she says that she feels completely free. It is Dubey who directs and encourages Saroj to make her think freely, to break away from the shackles, especially if they prove meaningless or unjustifiable. Rashmi is directed by Kalidas. It seems that Sahgal makes her heroines deliberately passive or dependent so that responsible men should come forward to help them find their way in the mire. It is the society's responsibility, Sahgal believes, to take steps to improve the quality of life for women, to make them full-fledged human beings, to realize their independent 'personhood'. Society consists of men and women. She cautions woman not to fritter away their hard-earned freedom in fighting for equality in dress or behaviour. They should achieve something solid to prove their merit. A self-fulfilled woman will be an asset to the family. She also finds fault with the society, which observes a double standard with regard to chastity or morality. While society imposes strong sanctions against even minor indiscretions on the part of women, it shows considerable leniency towards such aberrations in men. She also castigates the undue importance given to chastity. The concept of chastity, according to Sahgal, is much more related to mind than to body. Most of the times the punishment falls heavy on the aggrieved party that is woman. For her, Sex is not an act of body or for the moment but it pervades mind and spirit and all activities of husband and wife. It is an act of culmination of love, understanding and sympathy. But it does not mean she is for promiscuity. She condemns the frivolity and excesses in sex in women as exemplified in her novels. This article was undertaken as a critical study of the novels of Nayantara Sahgal in an endeavour to arrive at some valid conclusions regarding her attitude towards women's problems and how she envisages "the concept of modern marriage in India"

In *Mistaken Identity* (1989) the Rani of Vijaygarh also presents modern concept of marriage as she breaks all boundaries and makes her own rules. She is out and out a rebel. She belongs to an age when women were expected to stay behind veil. She remains completely detached and isolated in her family mansion. She meets and faces a very subtle and inhuman form of exploitation. Exhibiting exemplary strength of character the woman behind the veil breaks all ties with her husband, when he marries for the third time. She, like other female protagonists, is expected to conform to the ideals of subdued womanhood but her life lacks continuity and warmth. She feels isolated within her skin. She is a woman, who is living in 1920-30s is uneducated, rather illiterate, has an apathetic husband, from her life, when she discovers the man has no respect for her kind.

Therefore, she leaves her husband and meets Yusuf, it is as if she chooses to live again for the first time. In this relationship based on mutual love, mother feels needed, loved and cherished. It matters little that love came her way late in life, it is well worth the wait. Yusuf is sensitive to her every need and to her longing, to be free with the elements. So he takes her to Leningrad in winter,

"Where she'll see falling snow."

When Bhushan's mother decides to leave Vijaygarh, does not care for social recriminations. What use has she for a husband like father who had been a husband only in name? She has no reason to care about society's reaction when it had coerced, controlled and dominated every aspect of her life. More significantly, she has no use for a society that had condoned and even cheered every callous, chauvinistic act of Father's. In fact, her free spirit, her strong will, submitted to the demands of neither her husband nor the world. Jasbir Jain portrays her aptly in these words—

"She has always been a rebel. Her character has been one of restless questioning. She is a stronger person than her husband and refuses to accept his continued pursuit of pleasure and new ranees."

Sahgal believes in marriage a "new humanism" and a "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 passive role that requires no individual identity, but as man's equal and honoured partner."

In this context Ram Krishan seems to us the mouthpiece of the novelist as he expresses her human outlook in his marriage. His relation with his wife is based on the principle of equality. For he treat her his friend or companion not a slave to him.

Again, Sahgal's idea of marital harmony on the principle of equality is presented by Anna and Nicholas in the novel Plans for Departure. As both have a mutual understanding with each other and makes marriage a success. Nicholas respects Anna's views her desires, and her search for individuality. He asks her—On the other hand, Anna, also feels that things other than love, e.g. companionship and mutual respect, are important for any marriage to succeed. Anna stays married to Nicholas even though she believes that in spirit she is closer to Henry. This is because Anna's marriage to Nicholas is the coming together of friends who understand each other and get married due to some combination of events. While Nicholas loves Anna, she, one feels, is merely in search of a world that could help her forget a man she had admired but grown disillusioned with because she wrongly believed he had killed his wife. She admits to herself that—

"She had fallen in love, with a vision, not merely a man. No such indivisible magic would ever come her way again."

In spite of this realization her marriage does not break because Nick and Anna share a special kinship and have complete honesty and mutual respect that helps Anna's and Nick's marriage to succeed.

Conclusion:

The clear message Sahgal gives is men and women are equals and peaceful survival depends on mutual respect and understanding, women should have the moral courage to claim the rights and 'men.. were born to lead and educate sometimes to triumph'. So, in modern concept of marriage, Sahgal pleads for the new marital morality against traditional stereotyped marriage. Her new marital morality is based on mutual trust, proper harmony, consideration, generosity, and absence of pretence, selfishness and self-centredness. Her artistic vision is intensely moral with profound respect for the affirmative values of life.

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