



FROM BONDAGE TO FREEDOM – WOMEN IN NAYANTARA SAHGAL'S FICTION

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ABSTRACT

When Nora banged the door and stepped into the night in Ibsen's The Doll's House, she awakened to the harsh realities of the doll's house in which she had lived for years, where she had been treated as a mere object catering to the needs of her husband and children without uttering a word. But little did she know that her opening the door to the life of freedom paved the way for women all over the world to think about their place and identity in this androcentric world. The woman who has hitherto spent her time and energy in nurturing children and looking after her husband, in maintaining social and familial relationships suddenly wakes up to intense introspection and discovers her status of being a non entity in her family and society as well. Even in this so-called advanced technological world the woman in India is subjected to a grim existence devoid of self respect: as a child she is sold off to foreigners for a bridal price, as a young woman she comes as a supplier of dowry to her husband's house and as a widow she is relegated to the position of an unpaid servant living in the land of the dead.

INTRODUCTION

Though there is marginal change in the position of women after Independence, it is not on a larger scale. On paper Indian woman enjoys lots of privileges but in reality they have absolutely no rights. This dissatisfaction with the statusquo of woman found expression in a wide variety of portrayals of womanhood in Indian English fiction. Not only the woman writers like Anita Desai, Kamala Markandaya, Nayantara Sehgal but also male writers like Tagore, Sarat Chandra, R.K.Narayan, Bhabani Bhattacharya and many others focus on the plight of the tortured womanhood and her liberation from exploitation and discrimination.

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Conditioned by the powerful myths through the ages even the educated working woman finds it difficult to break through solid walls of tradition and feels completely isolated in her family life. The feminist movement in the West made the western women to come out of their shells and break away from the shackles of exploitation but western feminism does not have much impact on the purdah life of the Indian woman. Many of the women writers have attempted the portrayal of the western type of feminism in their writings but the attempt appears to be inclined more toward a readjustment rather than a breakaway. While male writers are concerned with woman's role in the family as mother, wife, sister and daughter only marginally, even women novelists who are concerned with political themes like Nayantara Sahgal deal with the traumatic experiences of women in general. Sahgal who tries to break away from the traditional concept of woman, does not view her women characters as wage earners or career oriented, but mainly as married women and it is in these roles they wish to experience freedom and to become aware of themselves as individuals and equal to their male counterparts. In her desire to be accepted as an equal and as an individual the woman may go through a divorce. But at the same time she cannot think of being all by herself; she turns to another marriage with the hope that this will be permanent as in the case of Rashmi in *This Time of Morning*(1965), Saroj in *Storm in Chandigarh*(1968) and Simrit in *The Day in Shadow*(1976).

The problems of the suffering Indian wife appeared as early as 1864 in the novel *Raj Mohan's Wife* by Bankim Chandra Chatterjee. Since then this image of the woman has dominated both Indian and Indian English fiction. She is the silent sufferer who despite her husband's neglect thinks of offering her whole self as the epitome of womanhood. The woman in literature is content to play the roles of Sita, Savitri And Shakuntala. In her preoccupation to be well adjusted, she is gentle and forgiving; self-effacing and self sacrificing. But Sahgal does not want to project this ever sacrificial woman in her fiction. She wants her woman to be assertive and independent. Sahgal's women try to come out of the vicious circle in which they have been placed by the society. In her earlier novels, the role played by the society adversely affected the characterization. The writer had been obsessed with distinct issues like Gandhian versus anti-Gandhian, child marriage, divorce, female infanticide etc. In *Mistaken Identity* Mother had been a child Bride. The writer describes vividly a young girl's traumatic experience of being forcibly taken away from the cozy atmosphere in which she lived for a while to suffer perennially in the in-law's house. Mother's experience is set up in the fictional world around the turn of the century. But unfortunately, this practice of child marriage is a part of modern India especially in slum areas and in some parts of North India. Simrit in *The Day In Shadow* is created solely for the purpose of focusing on the fact that society and law are both made and controlled by man. Society has its own way of getting back at a divorced woman. Her divorce settlement is society's reprisal at her leaving her husband, Somnath who has struck the death blow with his



settlement. All that he ever wanted from his wife was sex and a male child to carry his family lineage. He was totally insensitive to Simrit's desires and was unaware that communication was the missing link between the two. She has always been passive, allowed the things happen to her. In her usual docile manner, she initially puts up with her divorce settlement. In the end Raj instills in her positive thinking, and also a bit of optimism. With this a new Simrit is emerged. She can now face life with new optimism and with renewed vigour. The fact that Raj is there to take care of her and to support her in dealing with all her problems provides her with a positive outlook.

In *This Time of Morning* (1965) Rashmi does not want to break up with her husband although she realizes that they cannot go on together. Right from her earlier days she had been trained to endure, reconcile and preserve her relationship with her husband. At the same time she cannot accept her mother's idea about the permanence of marriage. Finally in order to assert her own self, she decides to divorce Dalip. She then renews her contact with Rakesh for without him she would have felt empty. Another such example is Saroj in *Storm in Chandigarh* (1968). She has put up with her husband's idiosyncrasies for a number of years, has given two children and is pregnant with the third child. She wants to hold on to her husband, keep marriage intact. Even such a self effacing woman realizes the futility of her life with Inder and finally breaks the marriage which is already in shatters. She takes up this course of action with the same courage and determination she had shown to keep up her marriage. Hopefully she has made the right decision by choosing a person with whom she can communicate. These are representative for women who suffer, strive, aspire and march towards freedom with renewed confidence. These are the images of the new women that Sahgal sought to portray in post Independence India. The writer believes that the independent women with the mind of their own, in search of their identity, did not have the right environment to express themselves before independence. In other words, Sahgal had been of the opinion that with our new found freedom the people, especially women would have the courage to try and get out of the chains that choke them.

This image of new woman is found in the delineation of characters of Mother and Razia in *Mistaken Identity*. They are presented as free thinking and liberated women. When one considers the time in which they live – the early decades of the twentieth century – it is amazing to see Mother's defiance and Razia's calculated risks though both serve to promote their need to be free. Mother refuses to accept her husband's many affairs and his two subsequent marriages as her fate and take for granted. On the other hand, she leaves her husband to start life anew with her Muslim friend Yusuf. Razia who befriends Bhushan and caught clandestinely does not lose hope. She never thinks about giving up her religion or its customs. She wants to reach out and touch the Sun without straining the confining chords of



Islam. Though socially ostracized, she turns her bad situation to her advantage: she eventually marries a modern, wealthy and influential Turkish diplomat.

Sonali in *Rich Like Us* and Anna in *Plans for Departure* are unique characters who have a strong sense of what is right. They uphold what seems to them good and right. The basis of their strong conviction comes from their strong and powerful social background. Anna's father has fought for the suffragate movement. Always he fights for a cause, be it in India or elsewhere. Anna totally influenced by her father, is not tied down to any socio-political concept other than the unswerving faith that every individual is free and every woman is equal to man. She is truthful and to her, freedom is not something that exists on paper alone, but an experience that rules every moment of one's life.

Sonali, a young IAS officer, is similarly influenced by her independent-minded father. He constantly works for the uplift of the downtrodden and this perception of the national problems is the legacy he passed on to his duty-minded daughter, Sonali. Though the father is dead by the time the Emergency is declared, what helps Sonali through the trying months is the spirit of freedom left behind by her father. It is because of him that this young woman is not broken when she loses her job as Joint Secretary in the Ministry of Industry for not following the official line. Instead, encouraged by Marcella and Brian Carlyle, she keeps herself occupied with her research and awaits the dawn after the Emergency. Unless a woman makes a conscious effort to be free from male domination or from society's confining influences, she will continue to be controlled by all kinds of cruel social prejudices.

Ours is a male dominated society. Its traditional stories and epics are written by men alone. All the rules and customs are framed by Manu in his Dharmasastra. Therefore double standards are quite natural in Indian society. While the women are supposed to be chaste, virtuous, submissive, willing to make all sacrifices to maintain peace and harmony at home, the men are allowed all sorts of liberties and privileges. Women are ostracized for a wrong they commit; but if the same wrong is committed by a man he is not even asked: rather it is treated as his right. From the point of view of the conventional society, Razia does not deserve any happiness in life for she had become a fallen woman. After her escapade with Bhushan, only she had been tainted by the society. Bhushan, who had been equally responsible for what had happened between them was not even reprimanded. Sahgal in her own way finds solution to this problem by providing comfortable life to Razia rather than subject her to misery that society had assigned to her. Inder in *Storm in Chandigarh* is clearly a male chauvinist: a man who has had sexual experiences with many women before marriage becomes livid with anger when his wife casually mentions having gone to bed with a young man before her marriage to Inder.



Another aspect that one finds in Sahgal's women is a mother's love for her children. Simrit (Shadow,1976) might have divorced her husband: but she is not self-centred to the extent of ignoring her children. Neither an unjust divorce settlement nor a man who awakens her individual sensibility can deter her devotion to her children. Even when her son decides to leave her and live with his millionaire father, she gives in to him only because her love for him surmounts personal losses. Saroj (Chandigarh,1968) is ever willing to sacrifice her own self for the sake of her children. It is for her children that she accepts her husband's idiosyncracies. Her final move of leaving him is also instigated by a need to provide her children with a real home. In Vishal, she probably sees a considerate and loving father, considerate enough to spend a dull evening playing games with the little ones.

Be it Saroj or Simrit, be it Mother or Razia, women must consciously make efforts to liberate themselves from the centuries old bondage. They must raise their voice; they must fight for their rights; they must unbound themselves. What are we going to lose if we fight except the chains that have binded us for ages? Nothing else.

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