

SOCIAL IDENTITY AND FEMALE CRISIS IN THE SELECT NOVELS OF NAYANTARA SAHGAL

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Abstract

Nayantara Sahgal is a feminist writer of Indian novels. She is one of the most important novelists with patriotism, who reproduce the Indian social and political scene before and after freedom in India in her works. The political consciousness which control her literary writings explicitly is inseparable from herself and her surroundings. Being the first Indian woman novelist, she produced novels and political commentaries in English with contemporary Indian political themes. Sahgal novel's reflect the contemporary Indian political themes and describe the various social and cultural changes that take place in India. Her writing has a solid realistic base and produces not only her individual values but also the changing values of a society.

Keywords: *feminist perspective, female identity, patriotism, political problems, gender role*

Her novel *A Time to be Happy* has many references to Indian Congress activities and the events of 1942 and it also depicts the search for identity of a Westernised Indian youth Sanad, against the backdrop of India's struggle for liberation. The main theme is the awakening of Sanad's conscience and his attempt at success in self-discovery and identity. Sahgal attempts to projectation's consciousness through the fragmentary consciousness of an individual.

As A. V.Krishna Rao observes in *Nayantara Sahgal: A Study of her Fiction and Non-fiction* "Nayantara Sahgal is perhaps one of our best Socio-political novelists today" (6). Sahgal had knowledge of politics and political figures in India, for she had spent her childhood and adolescence in Anand Bhawan which was the ancestral home of the Pundit Jawaharlal Nehru's family in Allahabad. It is beyond doubt that politics is in her blood as Nehru was her maternal uncle and her cousin Mrs.Gandhi. Her father being a veteran freedom fighter who had joined hands with the Nehru's family and other freedom fighters suffered greatly and died in the Indian prisons for the noble cause. It is no doubt that the important political events that had taken place during her life time form the background for

her literary works.

Sahgal's main achievement lies in her success as a political novelist who combines her descriptions of accurate and realistic happenings in the corridor of power with keen prophetic foresight to create unforgettable works. It becomes a choice of not only political beliefs and ideologies but of moral values as well. Her novels present evidently a chronological account of Indian politics from the last phase of freedom struggle to the breakdown of democracy in mid-seventies. As Jasbir Jain in the book *Nayantara Sahgal* says: "All around them, political and moral ideas were being discussed and formulated and the girl was a part of it. If it is Nehru's idealism which has influenced her political stance, it is her own father's gentleness and courage which has influenced her moral stance" (12).

A Time to be Happy, Sahgal's first novel, is open during the first days of Indian's Independence from Great Britain. Indian colonial history is marked by an alliance between nationalism and colonialism, which in a sense secured Indian modernity in the early twentieth century, an era dominated by Gandhian politics. The Nationalist intelligentsia could not remain unaffected by Gandhian

ideology. Some people hesitated between loyalty to the British and allegiance to the mother country. In *A Time to be Happy*, the character Sanad swings between these opposite pulls. His redemption comes about after he meets Kusum, through whom he reconnects with his past and cultural roots.

The novel, *A Time to be Happy* that covers the period from 1932 to 1948 is the story of Sanad, a youthful, active and educated man, against the backdrop of India's struggle for freedom. The locale of the story is Saharanpur, a small town in Northern India. There are so many textile industry. They are all mostly belonging to the British people and a few rich Indian businessmen. However the story sometimes moves to location like Lucknow, Delhi and Calcutta, but Saharanpur is the main place where events take place. The novel is an imaginative recapitulation of things past with a somewhat uncertain attitude towards the present, be it the freedom struggle or the Indo-British relations.

A Time to be Happy has many examples to congress activities and incident of 1942. The novel gives India's freedom struggle for Independence and it is changing social-political life of our country presented through the upper middle class. This novel is placed in the time immediate after the freedom of our country, but its narrative space is overcome by pre-independence times. The story is narrated by the omniscient observer, who is a middle aged man. The novel expands the consciousness of Sanad, the main character of the novel and his search for identity. The narrator believes in Gandhian ideology and he influences Sanad. The protagonist of the novel recalls his past life, especially the changes in his thinking and actions brought about by Gandhi's call to people of India. The narrator's idealism and integrity are the source of strength for Sanad during all crucial moments. It portrays the moderate development of freedom struggle movement and its impact on the pleasure seeking upper class society. It is also based on real facts and can be considered to be as a fictional autobiography of the writer. This is only a fiction which uses the first person narration. The protagonist, Sanad, a middle-aged man narrates the story from his recollection.

Sanad's marriage to Kusum occur at the same time

with India's Independence in 1947. Kusum feels about her marital relationship with Sanad, because she feels that he is living in strange and make-believe world of Anglo-Indians. During India's Independence, the year makes the changes on the social and political fronts. Through the consciousness of her characters, Sahgal has successfully captured the collapsed of Indian psyche at the time. The annihilation of Zamindari system disturbs father, Govind Narayan. Among the other characters, Kunti Behen gets involved in rehabilitation of refugees. Only Sanad takes the changes on the social and political scene in stride but Kusum is affected by the cruel and illogical death of her brother Sahdev. The Anglicized character of the novel such as Girish feel lost in the new set-up. In India, The Anglo-Indian's business tycoons affected by the new changes.

Nayantara Sahgal's works are coloured by a National consciousness of freedom and self-identity and she analysis the concepts of freedom and self-identity as a fundamental human value. It is with this underlying idea *A Time to be Happy* came out. It is a real life novel that expresses the problem of freedom and self-identity and the problem of search for a national identity through individual and family canvas of wide experiences. It is being presented through the protagonist, Sanad. As Dr.A.V.Krishna Rao has observed in *Nayantara Sahgal* :

The agonizing self-realization of an upper class Anglicized Indian is given a vivid aesthetic concretion in Sahgal's novel by dramatizing the contemporary consciousness on diverse levees of awareness. *Nayantara Sahgal's* literary sensibility achieves a satisfying novelistic quality in producing socially meaningful fiction. (6)

The idea of individual freedom, freedom of thought, and concern for man areal ideas which she has developed under the influence of Gandhiji. As Dr.A.V. Krishna Rao in *Nayantara Sahgal* has observed: "She is still very much under the influence of Gandhi and Nehru but feels artistically and intellectually free to emphasize the essence of their philosophical beliefs" (52).

A Time to be Happy starts with the revelation of Sanad's wish to resign his job from the British firm. The narrator advises Sanad to think twice before the decision is to be taken.

However, Sanad is the owner of a famous textile mill, he reject everything by wearing khadi. From the moment he always wears kadhi, he decides to follow our national leader Gandhi and his principles. Sanad's experiences lead him to understand the importance of real independent freedom and real powers rests in serving the society and vindicate the human values and human relationships with courage. This realization on the part of Protagonist Sanad allow him dig out his real self and asserts his identity as a selfless volunteer of Gandhi and his Ideology.

The narrator introduces the family of Shivpal along with other family members; Ammaji, Govind Narayan, the father of Sanad, his wife Lakshmi, his modern brother Harish and his wife Maya. In this novel, the life of Zamindarism with a battalion of servants and maids reminds us the past feudal system being followed in India. Govind Narayan is an advocate of British Government and he does not like any change through Gandhian movement. He feels very sad over his son's wish to resign the job. But his modern brother Harish feels at home in pair. In his outlook, India is not a land for great man. He wish to travel foreign countries. Maya is his wife. She neither accept of her husband's behaviour nor rejects it. She politely allows him to decide. But her patriotism for the country is revealed when she reveals her willingness to join the Rural Development programme organized by the Gandhian volunteers.

Nayantara Sahgal has been influenced by ideals and principles of Gandhi and she follows the policies of Nehru. By the everlasting influence, she has developed her own views about life. Freedom is important to a sensible human. No one can live without body likewise. Soul is bind with freedom. There are many ways and means to get and sustain freedom. The best possible way advocated and followed by Gandhi is non-violence or resistance without power. Non-violence includes dialogue and compromise to solve problem so fan kind. And to make a compromise, one should have a clear and Unbiased mind. Self-discovery and Self-identity can be developed through a clear mind. Self-identity without freedom is like a stone inside the stagnant pond.

Crisis of Sanad's life is takes off from A Time to be Happy. When Sanad seriously mediates with a famous

foreign company to give up his job. He feels ill at ease in the company of his British officers. The relationship between the narrator and Sanad is deeply personal because Sanad absolutely regards him as an idealist whose integrity is extraordinary. Sanad's dilemma about himself is typical in the cross-currents of the East and the West. He describes his problem by saying:

I've studied English history and literature. I've read the English poets. It's all the moral, real to me than the life. I live everyday. Don't you see, it has been burned into us. We're branded with it. My body is in India but my brain doesn't belong here. I might as well be an Englishman except for the colour of my skin. (232)

When Sanad is proposed by his company that he will be sent to England for advanced training, he sarcastically comments:

"I've always wanted to go to England", he continued, "to see what the original is like", The Original? ' I asked "the thing of which lamacarbon copy" he said.(231).

The novel presents that because of enormous differences in the levels of living and thinking of its people, there was a simultaneous coexistence of few layers of previous incidents in the country, which make people respond differently to the British. They either select to remain unmoved and fixed like Sanad's father or developed new ways for fighting their influence by invoking a part of their native tradition. Some, like the protagonist, gave up their rich and wealthy life for joining Gandhi's social and political programmes. Others, like Sanad, chose, to obey the British blindly, because they examined it both illuminating and rewarding a civilized mode of living and an effective road to success. The action of the novel is concluding with the idea of freedom waiting all over the nation. Political freedom for India in 1947 and individual freedom for Sanad. The narrator as well as the protagonist of A Time to be Happy invokes the happiness that true freedom can bring. This novel not only transfer the brighten experiences but also expand our consciousness of life's possibilities in terms of freedom and pleasure, which are political in nature.

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