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Struggle for Existence in Nayantara Sahgal's *Storm in Chandigarh*

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Abstract

Nayantara Sahgal's women characters evolve along with the creator's understanding of women. Her writing is clearly a part of Indian literature and emerges from her rootedness in middle class Indian society. She uses simple language to describe simple life especially of the Indian women in her novels. *Storm in Chandigarh* (1988) is intricately woven around the themes of violence, disorder, chaos and anarchy, not only at the political level but also at the personal level. Sahgal probes into the causes of such 'stormy situations' and vouches for a 'New Higher Morality', a 'New Humanism' based on comradeship.

Keywords

Nayantara Sahgal; *Storm in Chandigarh*; Struggle; Existence.



Nayantara Sahgal, the celebrated Indian English women novelist was born on 10th May 1927 in Allahabad. Her mother Vijayalakshmi Pandit was India's first ambassador to the United Nations. Her father was a successful barrister. Sahgal's women characters evolve along with the creator's understanding of women. Her writing is clearly a part of Indian literature and emerges from her rootedness in middle class Indian society. She uses simple language to describe simple life especially of the Indian women in her novels.

Storm in Chandigarh (1988) is intricately woven around the themes of violence, disorder, chaos and anarchy, not only at the political level but also at the personal level. Sahgal probes into the causes of such 'stormy situations' and vouches for a 'New Higher Morality', a 'New Humanism' based on comradeship. The first line of the novel "Violence lies very close to the surface in Punjab"(SC 01) is the key line to understand the 'storm'. This 'storm' not only causes commotion in the political situation, but also cause havocs in the lives of the three couples- Inder and Saroj, Jit and Mara, and Vishal and Leela who are portrayed as against the political backdrop of storm or confrontation between the newly divided states of the Punjab and Haryana over the issues of Chandigarh and, Bakra Nangal territory etc. *Storm in Chandigarh* is perhaps Nayantara Sahgal's most successful novel from the point of view of characterization. The readers try to understand themselves and grow out of their limitations.

Saroj, the female protagonist in the novel is married to Inder who runs the textile mills of Saroj's cousin Nikhil Ray's company in Chandigarh. There is no emotional communion between Saroj and Inder, in spite of the fact that they have been married for the last four years and have two children. In the novel, Saroj emerges as a victim of male tyranny and chauvinism. She represents the new woman who is trying to retain her individuality and breathe freely in the suffocating atmosphere of passionless and emotionally unfulfilling marriages.

Storm is Chandigarh shifts from the generational portrayals to peer group marriages and we have four of them-Saroj and Inder, Jit and Mara, Vishal Dubey and Leela, Gauri and Nikhil. These relationships have their own tensions. Inder is unfair to Saroj trying to punish her for something that was part of growing up while he himself indulges in an adulterous relationship with Mara. Vishal's relationship with Leela is over, he has never been able to reach her despite the love he has felt for her all along. His character contrasts sharply with Inder's who lives in the world of divided morality. Inder feels at rest with himself with Mara, for he satisfies a need in her. And Mara turns to Inder because the gentleness of Jit does not mean anything to her. Sex is recognized as an important part of marriage, and when adultery takes place it places sex in a sphere outside the recognized moral code, thus freeing the relationship from permanence.

"The New Woman" is determined not merely to live, but to live in self-respect, thus implicitly demanding a re-alignment of the parameters on which marriage functions. Marriage without emotional involvement, sex without passion, and love without respect are anathema to her as she maneuvers her way through the changing times. Saroj had a physical relationship with a person before her marriage but she does not consider it as a sin rather as a part of growing up. After her marriage she has been faithful to Inder to the fullest degree. She is a person who values mutual trust, consideration, honesty, communication and absence of pretence in a relationship. "Hailing from a liberal family, believing in openness and trust as the hallmark of relationships, Saroj had naively presumed that her husband shared those values, not realizing that he was the product of an atmosphere where male dominance is the most formidable Of cults" (SC 98).

She is thoroughly truthful to Inder and her honesty in marital relationship can be gauged from the fact that she even confesses about her premarital relationship to him with the intention of looking forward to a clean

break from the past. But this confession actually dooms their marriage. Inder “was maddened by it. When it came over him he sat looking at Saroj with a revulsion that had ancient, tribal, male roots” (SC 96). Inder represents the traditional patriarchal attitude of society toward women which puts high premium on female chastity and virginity before marriage.

The double standards of patriarchal morality is visible from the fact that Inder, who wants to make Saroj feel ‘ashamed’ of her pre-marital affair himself has many sexual experiences before marriage as the third person narrator tells, “he had been precocious and successful in sex, robustly collecting experience where he found it” (SC 134). But women have no right to question male promiscuity or indulge in practices which are considered to be male prerogatives. This patriarchal attitude is aptly summed up by Dubey when he says, “The one thing you could not crave, the thing that was a crime was that they should inhabit the world as your equals, with splendor and variety of human choice before them” (SC 190). Men like Inder who are the products of conventional orthodox patriarchal society and whose consciousness is steeped in male chauvinism can never accept non virgin women as wives. Inder is unable to view any other kind of relationship other than this with Saroj. M.L. Malhotra rightly points out the male-chauvinism in Inder thus: “Belong as he does to the he-man school and born and brought up as he is in an atmosphere, where male-dominance is a formidable cult, there is no question of any freedom or self-expression or growth for saroj, nor of nay mutual co-partnership between them” (230).

Inder felt deeply cheated as he recalls, “Somewhere he had read there were primitive societies that demanded the blood of virginity as there were evidence of female purity. No man need be cheated of that. He had been cheated” (SC 96). Human civilization, irrespective of time and space has always demanded that a woman should be pure and virgin before marriage. In the ancient times, Sita had to go through the test of purity after she was abducted

by Ravan, in order to return to the fold of marriage. In the nineteenth century, Angel Clare of Hardy's *Tess of D'urbervilles* who was deeply in love with Tess leaves her when he comes to know that her virginity was ravished by another man before their marriage. Saroj tries her level best to adjust and compromise at every point with Inder because she feels that she is responsible for the failure of their marriage. She always remains vigilant not to do things which could annoy Inder and tries to talk on 'safe' topics which could not make him burst into anger. Because of such conscious living with Inder where there is no room for spontaneous behavior, she always feels tense and pressurized. Her mental burden is evident when she frankly tells Vishal, "Half the time one is afraid you know saying the wrong thing or of being misunderstood just for being oneself and being punished for it. So one spends such a lot of time acting or at least hiding and that's very tiring" (SC 89).

This makes evident that Inder allows no individuality and freedom to Saroj. Inder in this sense behaves like a typical representative of patriarchal society in which, as Julia Kristeva points out that a woman is always marginalized by the male symbolic order. He wants to control all her actions and wants her thoughts to be in agreement with him.

When Saroj finds a good friend in the form of Vishal Dubey and frequently goes for walk with him, Inder gets deeply infuriated. He snubs her for being absent from home. Saroj's utterance "I like to talk to him. He is a good man" inflames Inder and he blunts, "I don't give a damn if he is Jesus Christ" (193).

Inder can love Saroj only in the capacity of an obedient slave, a possession or commodity. He can never think of her as a person with ideas, feelings and emotions. To Inder, a businessman, "A wife was one half an enterprise, the compliant partner, who presided over home and children and furthered her husband's career" (SC 43). There is no passionate bond, affection, emotional communication or understanding between Saroj and Inder.

He treats her with total indifference and regards her only as a sex object. When he comes to know that Saroj is pregnant in spite of their already having two children, he felt irritated and rebukes her as if only she is responsible for her pregnancy. He puts the whole blame on her when he says, “Hundreds of women use the damned thing successfully its madness to have three children nowadays” (SC 46). Vishal Dubey is a feminist in the real sense of the term. As Toril Moi says in his essay, “Feminist Literary Criticism” that men can be feminists and, it is the sole prerogative of woman to be a feminist. Most of Dubey's ideas in the novel show his deep concern about the lot of women in present times.

He thought of his own country women as the subdued sex, creatures not yet emerged from the chrysalis, for whom the adventure of self-expression had not even begun... there had long been a figure of humility, neck bent, eyes downcast, living flesh consigned to oblivion...Their sphere was sexual and their job procreation (189).

Comparing Anita Desai and Nayantara Sahgal, K. Meera Bai writes “Anita Desai's women either succumb or survive the existential problems within the family fold whereas Nayantara Sahgal's women come out of the bond, if need be, to live as free individuals” (223). Her characters have an “empty shell marriage” defined by Haralambos, a sociologist: “when the spouses are together, remain legally married but their marriage exists in name only (360).

Man-woman relationship is the unit of individual and social life and hence it has been the central theme of the novelists all over the world. They have exposed the part sex is playing in man's life today. Insistence on or deviation into sex is a sign of man's chaotic mental state and the crisis of decaying values. The characters of Nayantara Sahgal, reflect the changing facets of man-woman relationship in India. The women characters of Sahgal

are no longer the subdued sex a figure of humility, neck bent, eyes downcast. In their conjugal relationship and their relationship outside marriage the heroines of Sahgal are solitary individuals striving for self-assertion.

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