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## Feminist Issues in the Novel of Nayantara Sahgal's *Storm in Chandigarh*

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### Abstract

*Storm in Chandigarh* is a work by Nayantara Sahgal, an Indian English writer with elite political lineage. She is the second daughter of Vijayalakshmi Pandit, the sister of the first Prime Minister of India Pt. Jawahar Lal Nehru. Nayantara Sahgal was born in an aristocratic family in New Delhi with a strong political clout. Being part of a family at the centre of Indian polity, Nayantara Sahgal has the first hand experience of witnessing some of the most talked about political events of her times. From the literary point of view too, her maternal uncle Pandit Jawahar Lal Nehru, who himself was a great English writer, and Krishna Hutheesingh (younger sister of Vijayalakshmi Pandit) who was a great exponent amongst English writers from India, establish the genetic linkage to Nayantara Sahgal's emergence as a prodigy in English novelists from India. Nayantara Sahgal was married twice – first to Gautam Sahgal, who was a British official in pre-independence India, and was totally absorbed in British culture. After that she started to live with Mangat Rai, while both of them were married to other persons. It was a kind of outrageous act in those times and traditionally against the societal norms. Thus, Nayantara Sahgal to some extent was ahead of her times – at least in breaking the established norms of her times as far as man and woman relationship was concerned.

**Keywords:** Prodigy, Feminism, Victim, Hegemony, Torture

*Storm in Chandigarh* is a widely acclaimed work of Nayantara Sahgal, with undertones of feminism bound in a backdrop of political upheaval. The novel has four major women characters. Now coming on to the feminist themes raised by Nayantara in this work. We shall discuss it under certain broad headings as follows:

- a) Women's status in general
- b) Ill treatment meted out to women
- c) Man-woman relationship

- d) Women's education
- e) Victims of monotony and suppressed desires
- f) Patriarchy

**a) Women's Status in General**

The novel, *Storm in Chandigarh* entails the pathetic state of affairs of women in the elite segment of the Indian society. Gauri represents that segment of elite class where a woman is reduced to submit to a marriage. She belongs to a family where marriage is considered to be the ultimate destination of a woman, where gaining education means increasing the prospects of having a better husband. Gauri too is no different, "... I went to a convent in Calcutta and then sat around for a couple of years until Nikhil was found for me and then I married him" (SIC 145). It seems that women are some sort of commodity manufactured in a factory and after the products are manufactured they are stored in the godown of the factory till a suitable customer takes them off. "[S]at around for a couple of years" (SIC 145) signifies the irrelevance of a woman as a being in herself. It signifies that despite having got education in a convent, there is no room for a woman to do the things she really wants to do; there is only one way out to start life – and that is marriage. It is this subtleness of staying at home to look for a suitable groom that turns Gauri into a so called butterfly – who is trying to find the "lost treasure" in the parties, socialization and of course delving into an extramarital affair. Gauri is intelligent yet she has no other role than to play a rich man's accompaniment; she is educated – though not upto college level yet she has little or no scope of applying her education except by employing her beauty, intelligence and education into establishing social contacts, inaugurating arts exhibitions and being satisfied as a "social butterfly" (SIC. 146). But is it this that she wants? Is it what she wants and if so then why does she seek solace in the arms of a man who is not her husband? The characterization of Gauri is the representation of the meaningless life of the beautiful elite class housewives who are destined to become possessions for their husbands and who are always in search of their identity.

In contrast, Leela is the woman who also suffers from such identity crisis. It is the hurried marriage which turns an otherwise symbol of "radiating health and vivacity" that is "capturing and holding a mood of bubbling gaiety" and in whom the "...essence of youth seemed to be concentrated" (SIC 60) turn into a person who is "...left him empty of the reality of herself" (SIC 61). Leela is also suffering from an adventureless marriage. Probably Vishal's servile attitude, unquestioning behaviour and submission to her are a curse rather than a bane for Leela. Her affair with Hari is also an indication of the dissatisfaction with life she is living and finally her state of indecisiveness and agony is reflected in her decision to go for abortion. Leela probably incarnates an ignored woman who wants much more from her husband than he gives her. Vishal in a way is a sophisticated person, who is hesitant, somewhat servile and submissive in their relationship and that is where the pleasure of living

together is lost. One cannot live with incompatible persons – where one is always ready to surrender. Thus through Leela, the trauma of elite class sophisticated life turning into a painful ordeal of having no adventure comes to the fore. Here again, being reduced to play the role of a housewife is the key issue that has unspokenly been told. Leela's ordeal is that she too suffers from an identity crisis, her disinterest in Vishal, affair with Hari and decision to get aborted all indicate that she is living a dissatisfactory life. The elite women living in the comforts and luxuries of their households despite having the power of money at their disposal are sometimes powerless and disinterested because they really are capable of more things than just play the role of social butterflies. For Gauri and Leela, though it is true they are not submitted to any physical violence or abuse by their respective husbands but their portrayal unfolds the sordid state of women in the elite segment of the society where in order to search themselves they often have to play the role of a social butterfly or have to behave in a self-destructive rebellious manner.

Mara, owing to her mixed ethnicity, attains a special status in society. Like Gauri and Leela, she also suffers from the dilemma of being alone in the crowd. It seems that through the women characters of the novel, the author wishes to convey the hollowness of the lives of urban high society women. The problem is that women are expected to behave in a set pattern of life – their roles are limited. They can play the role of a lover, housewife, mother and caretaker – be it caretaker of the homes of their husband or get involved in taking care of children other than their own – as Mara does in her school. But these are not the things that they really want to do – and that is why there is discontent.

The novel depicts a political imbroglio as a side story but throughout the novel we do not see any female character showing concern over this political imbroglio as a community problem; they only seem to be concerned of the impact of this problem when it starts to affect their personal and family lives. One cannot expect this kind of insensitivity in the socially aware and active people. It is paradoxical that while the author is trying to raise the issue of oppression of woman, she is showing them as dumb shells who are unconcerned about their surroundings and are concerned only about their personal loneliness and ways to fill this void.

The status of the woman as depicted in the novel is generally that of a second class citizen in society. They are the one who are always at fault. Take for example the context when Saroj tells Inder about her pregnancy and Inder puts all the blame on Saroj, “[h]undreds of women use the damned thing successfully... ‘It’s madness to have three children nowadays’” (SIC 39). They are treated as objects of entertainment. Inder in effect has been shown as a person for whom a woman is just to be enjoyed. When Saroj is pregnant and he cannot have sex with her, he even does not want to touch Saroj, he has to make effort to touch her and this touch is free of any feeling and compassion. “...the touch without sexual

significance, the caress of affection, was different. It cost him an effort to make it.... His hand felt leaden on her stomach” (SIC 45).

Inder has a very traditional and conservative outlook as far as Saroj is concerned; he considers her as a child producing and rearing machine. No doubt, when Saroj complains about her non-participation in child-rearing, he flatly tells “[i]t's a woman's job” (SIC 50). Karen O'Connor in the book *Gender and Woman's Leadership* says, “second-wave feminism revealed the oppression of women in the entertainment media in terms of obsession with portrayal of women as sex objects” (72). O'Connor terms it “victim feminism”. By portraying such instances in *Storm in Chandigarh*, Sahgal also tries to use victim feminism in its real sense.

In the eyes of Inder, Saroj is no more than an object that he can possess. When Mara discusses about the ill treatment of Saroj at the hands of Inder during the picnic, he stiffly says – “‘You don't understand’... ‘She belongs to me’” and even continues to stand on his version when Mara says “‘Belongs to you? So do your shoes’” (SIC 124). On which Inder shamelessly says, “‘Even my shoes are special to me because they are mine.’ and Mara retorts ‘They’re special because they fit you. If they didn’t you’d throw them away. And you can’t own a woman, even if she’s your wife’” (SIC. 124). This entire conversation speaks volume about the place of women in the life of people like Inder. On another occasion, Inder does not miss the chance to show that a woman has always been and will continue to be subordinate to man – “ A thousand years from now a woman will still want and need a master, the man who will own and command her—and that’s the man she’ll respect” (SIC. 92). This is a complete depiction of patriarchal society where woman is placed below the man in all social hierarchies.

The novel has shown the status of women to be subordinate. Terms like 'whore' are used to define Gyan Singh's mother. “‘Your mother came to the end she deserved. She was a whore’” (SIC 102). Although the context has not been provided yet in the next few lines it has been shown that women do not mean anything to a male dominated society – “‘It does not matter what happens to a whore’” (SIC 102). 'Whore' is a word that is used as a weapon by the male controlled society to derogate and downgrade the women. William Shakespeare in *Othello* has used the term 'whore' (III.3.356), a 'subtle whore' (IV.2.20) and a 'cunning whore' (IV.2.88) to depict Othello's fear of Desdemona's sexuality that erupts into slanderous abuse on a number of occasions by the use of word 'whore'. It is easy to term a woman 'whore' if she expresses her sexuality and Sehgal has intentionally used the word 'whore'. Whore of course is an abusive word and to depict it in context with Gian Singh's mother sometimes seems to be an attempt on the author's end to justify the psychology of Gian Singh.

**b) Ill treatment meted out to women**

The fightings between Saroj and Inder always end up with Saroj being at the receiver's end. Inder considers Saroj his property and to insult and humiliate her is his right by marriage. For him a wife is nothing more than a physical possession – a possession just like a pair of shoes, a possession he can control, entertain with and can throw away once it fails to please him. For Inder a woman is no more than a sex slave, and his physical intimacy with a woman is confined to her ability to physically satisfy him. He continues to take out the skeletons out of the graveyard of Saroj's memory by regular questions about her teenage sexual adventure. He makes inquisitions in such a manner that embarrass and humiliate Saroj. “A friend? To go to bed with? How many times did it happen?” (SIC 84). The way Inder humiliates Saroj is intriguing and painful; take this example:

‘You’re not sure.’ The voice, remote and dangerous, unpredictable as a rawhide whip, flicked at her nerves. ‘But it’s such a signal event in a girl’s life surely. The first man. A woman never forgets her first man. The experience must have been a shock, a physical shock. Wasn’t it a shock?’ (SIC 84)

A part of her mind prayed, God, God, God, God, God. She had learned that terror was not an external catastrophe. It was the failure of reason.

‘Answer me. Was it a shock?’

‘I don’t know. I think so. I don’t remember.’ She tried to keep the stammer out of her voice.

‘But you didn’t protest.’

‘No—yes—I don’t remember’. (SIC 84-85)

Here Inder behaves in a hypocritical manner having multiple standards to distinguish woman from woman, and man from woman as far as premarital and extramarital sex is concerned. He himself enjoys the extramarital physical relationship with Mara, and admires her despite the fact that she is indulged in an affair out of marriage. He even had relations with women other than Mara as he himself tells Mara:

Not long before I met you. I'd been involved for about a year with a woman of rather a savage temperament. She was married and quite a bit older than I was, and I was probably easy prey, young and very infatuated and uncertain of myself. It was a fatal attraction and it took me by the throat. I was not happy in it, but I had to have it. It was a compulsion. I don't think I could ever have let go on my own. It was she who dropped me, cruelly, without any explanation. It broke me. I thought I'd never survive it. (SIC 210)

As far as the perspective of a patriarchal society is concerned it renders women powerless, and at the same time, manages to create and maintain a powerful social control apparatus aimed at dominating, exploiting, and in extreme cases, killing women. Inder's

behaviour towards Saroj could be considered as a gender inequality in sexual relationships. By the tradition, in sexual endeavours men are considered to be dominant and women subordinate. Expression of sexual desire and an adventure to fulfill it is considered a forbidden thing for a woman; however, for men no such distinction exists. A man can make foray into the sexual fantasies, nurture them and fulfill them without being subjected to any question. Sexuality is a crime for women. In truth, women and men share similar sexual desires and sexual experiences during their lives in this society. Although it may be hard to believe as our culture so successfully contends that they are completely different. However, scientific research on sexuality has shown that women and men are no different. The sexes share remarkably similar biological foundations (Jackson 148). However, Inder held a traditional outlook and approach; he believed that "...if the woman you had married, thought Inder, had slept with another man, knives shall twist in your vitals" (SIC 86).

On repeated inquisitive queries on her premarital sexual encounter, Saroj asks "...I was curious. Is that a crime?" and Inder's response was "'Good God. Didn't you have any inhibitions, any sense of modesty? Couldn't your curiosity wait until you got married?'" (SIC. 116)

Inder has been portrayed as a bourgeois defender of morality defined as per the convenience and clearly marked by gender inequality. While pointing finger towards Saroj's premarital relationship and continuing harassment for the mistake, if any, made by her he sets aside his own sexual encounter with a married lady much older than him. It is not that he is restricted to the psychological harassment of Saroj; he violates her physically too, like a mindless wild creature who is there to assert his supreme authority. He loses his senses and becomes violent – "When he came to his senses he saw her struggling for balance, her hands ineffectually shielding her face from his blows" (SIC 175).

It is not that all the women in the novel are treated badly. Mara is loved immensely by Jit, who also understands and who does not have problem in giving his wife a fair chance to lead a free life. Despite having a disagreement over Mara's tastes, he sets aside minor issues in humour. Talking about the preference of Mara in decorating her house he humorously comes forth with a pleasing remark "[w]hat do you think of a woman who prefers pebbles to lilies or goldfish?" (SIC 52)

Jit's treatment towards Mara is mature; it reflects his consciousness, love and caring attitude. It is a sentimental one and has a great impact on Mara. He is the one who writes the notes like, "[f]or a determined celebrator of Christmas from her devoted husband" (SIC. 95). He is always ready to bury the hatchet and treat his woman right. Jit is ready to accept and start afresh with Mara.

Similarly despite the unbalanced relationship of Vishal and Leela, Vishal never treats Leela in a derogatory manner. However, he sometimes considers himself responsible for the melancholy in the life of Leela and contemplates: "He had made a mistake that when he

married her, but he had wronged her too. He knew he would not further injure her if he could help it” (SIC 61). Thus here again, the treatment meted-out to Leela is in no manner anything given to a lesser creation of God.

The point here is that if the author wants to make the treatment of woman a feminist issue in the novel, then she would have portrayed more male characters ill treating their female counterparts, as Inder did.

### **c) Man-woman relationship**

Nayantara has honestly reflected the spectrum of man-woman relationship in the text *Storm in Chandigarh* without falling prey to any kind of *ism*. That is why the portrayal of man-woman relationship in this novel seems to be so natural and realistic and surpasses the imposed convictions of feminism. The entire story revolves around four couples – Nikhil-Gauri, Jit-Mara, Vishal-Leela and Inder-Saroj. All have their own issues. Among the four couples portrayed in the novel, none have a perfect relationship. Being part of a same plot of story all the couples are somewhat interrelated.

Nikhil is rich, generous and loving – yet his wife Gauri is in an extramarital relationship with Vishal. It is difficult to understand whether it is the physical attraction of Vishal, any incapability of Nikhil or just an attempt at breaking the monotony of Gauri's life that drives this relationship. However, despite this extra-marital relationship there is no turbulence in the life of Nikhil and Gauri, they are leading a supposedly happy life and the author has made no attempt to either approve or disapprove the relationship of Vishal and Gauri on part of Nikhil. For Vishal, Gauri is the person filling the void created by the death of his wife Leela. Despite this complexity in relationships – Gauri takes her life simply just like “[a] cup of tea first thing in the morning. Love. A message from Jenny Souza” (SIC. 15). This kind of liberal attitude towards sexual pleasure can be termed as ‘libertarian feminism’. According to Ann Ferguson, for ‘libertarian feminists’, the key feature of sexuality is the potentially liberating aspects of the exchange of pleasure between consenting partners (Ferguson 106).

The relationship of Jit-Mara, it is a relationship which is bonded by sweetness yet it seems to be so sugary that Mara ventures for something bitter to change the taste. Mara had some fantasies to be fulfilled which Jit was incapable of,

She wanted some man to drag her by the hair to submission, bring her to a gasping shuddering climax in sex, and brand her personality with his own every waking hour. Jit knew as he thought it that it was not true. Mara was fine and intelligent. She was conscious of all that she did. She had pride. She would never be an object for anybody's use. And he loved her. He wanted to turn her around to face him and offer her a companionable sip of his drink. It was his misfortune that whatever else she wanted, it was not him. (SIC 120)

Mara searches for this in Inder, who is brute and savage both in behaviour as well as in sexual act. But Mara is a wonderful personality, she has lasting impact on the men's mind and her impact is visible beyond the game of sex. Inder on the other hand is not the one who is at par with Mara, and Mara soon realizes it and comes back to Jit. At some places, Jit thus defies the view that women who need or desire human connectedness and commitment to truly enjoy sex, to be lustful, are alienated (Ferguson 116). According to Srivastava and Agarwal, Jit helped Mara to come out of the emotional jungle by talking to her of an unhappy experience of his own. The realization causes them to be reconciled and remain true to each other. The novelist says that the conflict in marriages arises mainly from absence of communication resulting in the estrangement of individuals (Srivastava 274).

Inder and Saroj have relationship which is full of turbulence. Saroj has had a pre-marital sexual encounter which is ruining the relationship of the two. She tries to forget it but Inder does not let it happen. He plays the role of a traditional conservative patriarchal husband who thinks that the burden of maintaining virginity and chastity for the spouse is limited only to women. He thinks that a woman should preserve her virginity for her husband – “Good God. Didn't you have any inhibitions, any sense of modesty? Couldn't your curiosity wait until you got married?” (SIC 116). But this morality drains out when he himself makes sexual overtures with an already married woman – not once but at least twice as admitted by him in the novel. He is a typical suspicious husband who himself is infidel but considers his wife to be a cheat. His jealousy is well explored by these lines:

Jealousy had caught him unprepared. It had no place in an order that clearly demarcated the roles of men and women, unless that venerable order were breached, trampled and mocked. He was maddened by it. When it came over him he sat looking at Saroj with a revulsion that had ancient, tribal, male roots. It forced him to focus on her a concentration he would ordinarily have spread over the whole area of their lives. There were people he knew who would have flung her out with the rubbish, considered her used, soiled and unfit for marriage. (SIC 86)

He leaves no chance to humiliate his wife. When Vishal and Saroj's friendship blooms and they start to go out together, and Gyan Singh uses this opportunity to assassinate the character of Vishal Dubey and gets an offending news item published on this relationship, Inder's male chauvinism is hurt and he uses this opportunity to insult and humiliate Saroj – “Here's an item that will interest you,'he said, taking a creased newspaper clipping out of his pocket and handing it to her. 'The result of your high-noon excursions with Dubey'” (SIC 213).

Inder loves power. He makes Saroj sleep on the floor, face his violent tyrannies and bear his whimsical behaviour throughout the story. In Saroj, we see an innocent girl who has made an error sometime in her adolescence and has to bear its outcome throughout her stay



with Inder. The entire Inder-Saroj saga is a depiction of the poor state of woman in a patriarchal society.

The relationship of Vishal and Leela is one of the most intriguing relationships in the novel. It is difficult to understand as to who is at fault. However, the mute acceptance of extra-marital affair of Hari and Leela, and Vishal's liberty to listen to Hari's utterances regarding her so called love with Leela shows the generosity of Vishal to accept the reality. However, Leela seems to live in a world governed by pride and prejudice. She is not ready to accept the reality, neither has she admitted her relationship with Hari nor does she tend to rationalize her attitude towards Vishal. Finally, we see the tragic end of this relationship with the death of Leela. Leela's character by no way can be said to be a depiction of feminism. Leela has been shown as an arrogant, obstinate and uncooperative woman who is totally whimsical, a female counterpart of Inder who thinks what he/she does is always right.

#### **d) Women's education**

As far as the issue of women's education is concerned, Nayantara Sehgal does not seem to make a strong statement over the usefulness of education for women. In the novel, all the female characters are educated. Saroj is educated upto College level while Gauri has done her schooling in a convent. Mara, as a matter of fact, runs a school and thus it is conveyed that she too is educated. Although no account of Leela's education has been provided yet given the settings and environment, it too seems that she too is sufficiently educated. However, what Nayantara fails to highlight is the importance and significance of education in the true feminist context. Saroj is educated but of what use is it when she submits to the tyrannies of her husband. Thus the author has diminished the value of education and has established the age old phrase beautiful but dumb. It is disgusting to see that despite being educated none of these women looks beyond their traditional roles. Even Mara, who is running a school, is reluctant to prove her worth as an entrepreneur and runs the school more as a hobby than a profession. In the turbulent political scenario, these women seem to participate in a dumb charade. In effect, the entire novel seems to be absorbed in the overtones of sexual relationships, monotonies of life, physical assaults and does not raise the real and more important feminist issues.

#### **e) Victims of monotony and suppressed desires**

The entire novel portrays victimization and suppression of desires, not only among women but also men. Vishal is victimized by Leela's whimsical behaviour and is deprived of the physical pleasures of marriage; Saroj is victimized by Inder and is deprived of her desire to enjoy the tender pleasantries of nature and abstract things. Gauri seems to fill some untold physical void in proximity with Vishal. Mara is missing the savageness in sexual encounters. Jit is missing the reciprocity in relationship with Mara. Among all, only Inder seems to assert his authority – just like Gyan Singh who seems unconcerned about what others say or think, for people like them only might is right.

#### f) Patriarchy

Except Inder who asserts himself so strongly, none of the other male characters in the novel behave in a traditional patriarchal manner. However, the depiction of the Saroj-Inder relationship is the major theme showing a typical patriarchal dominance and in order to highlight it further, the author has taken the help of the political imbroglio that runs as a parallel story. While Inder reflects the typical patriarch for whom men can never err and Saroj reflects the typical servile subject, the political scenario also shows an arrogant and whimsical Gyan Singh who is busy in all types of activities to establish his authority over Harpal Singh. Throughout the novel, the two vehement symbols of patriarchy seem to dominate (Inder and Gyan Singh) while the other two symbols of submission and servility seems to play a meek role (Saroj and Harpal) but at the climax both gain courage enough to resist and oppose the oppression, challenge the authority of the patriarch and establish themselves free of their authority. In fact, without raising issues over issues, or challenging the authority in bits, the author builds a volcano like situation and then shows that the silence before the eruption of volcano and silence after the eruption of volcano are no more indications of weakness.

Thus, we can say that the presentation of the feminist issues in Nayantara's works is very natural, simple and touches the sensitivities of the readers mind. The feminist issues raised by Nayantara have their unique pattern as they do not seem to challenge the male authority or steps into some male domain, instead her characters seem to demand and explore their own existence without masquerading as males. Female protagonists in her works are not willing to do the things that men do in order to get their place; however, they want to lead a life as a woman, without infringed upon and interrupted by the male members of the society.

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