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A Search for Identity: A Female Centric Study of the Novels of Nayantara Sehgal

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Abstract

Navantara Sehgal seeks to present in each of her novels, a consistent point of her moves from satire and irony to a positive constructive vision. Sehgal appears to be trading in new and perhaps intense areas of experience confronting with fresh insights and lyrical contents of human life. The novels of Sehgal give creative release to feminine sensibility and articulate the birth pangs of a new socio-political order like Virginia Woolf and Anita Desai. Nayantara Sehgal is also a prose rhapsodist of sentiments, Feelings and emotions passing through human stream of consciousness. In her novels the protagonist is in a pursuit of self knowledge. The transition in the women's consciousness in India has continued. The Indian woman is weir on her way to move from the feminine or feminist face to the face of displacement and self discovery. In Nayantara Sehgal's work the new women comes out in more prominent way to escape the deadlock perpetuated by the unilateral dictates of a perniciously effective patriarchal form of society. This, centrifugal revolt takes definite shape in her novels. Though divorce has been depicted as an alternative way of life but it is not the escape but the way to curb the drudgery perpetrated through discriminatory laws promulgated by the male dominated society. She is an iconoclast in her own right as she succeeds in demolishing the hitherto held myths and images of the Indian women; the "Patiparmeshwar image": i.e. the husband is god. Novels bring out Nayantara Sehgal as a writer with feminist concerns seeking independent existence of women. She sees women as victims of conventional Indian society engaged in their quest for identity.

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Patriarchal women writers in English present with great insight and understanding the dilemma which is faced by women in a traditional society where dual morality is the accepted norm. Self – willed and individualistic women face suffering caused by broken relationships. Women who are aware of their emotional needs and strive for self fulfillment rejecting existing traditions and social set up are seen in the novels of Nayantara Sehgal. These women long for liberty and want a new social order where they can be what they want to be, where there is no need for hypocrisy, and where character is judged by the purity of the heart and not the chastity of the body. Almost all her novels portray women who embrace this new concept of modernity.

Though Nayantara Sehgal has been hailed chiefly as a political novelist, her feminist concern is quite overt and her fighter spirit quite vocal in her fiction. Sehgal concern for women, however, is that of a humanist more than it is of a feminist. This accounts for her holistic vision. Though defiant, all her women are not viragos as also though overpowering all her men are not demons. She holds a truly Indian approach to the issue and adds a new dimension to feminist philosophy without joining the fighter band. A real life crusader Sehgal knows where the shoe pinches and makes no scruples about the not-so-healthy vision of life that even some women hold.

Most of Nayantara Sehgal's characters belong to the affluent upper class of Indian society. Sehgal sticks scrupulously to the people she knows intimately; she does not try to write about the caste-ridden middle class or the poor Indian villager just to conform to the accepted image of India. Her range of characters simplifies her technique; she does not have to struggle to present Indian conversation in English (a problem which bedevils many other Indian novelists writing in English) as most of her characters are the kind of people who would talk and think in English in real life.

Her autobiographies, *Prison and Chocolate Cake* and *From Fear Set Free* are more satisfying than her earlier novels. An outstanding novel is *The Day in Shadow*; here personal concerns take precedence over politics. The heroine, Simrit Raman, a writer, is a divorcée (like Sehgal herself), and the novel shows the prejudice she faces in male-dominated Indian society. She grows close to Raj, an idealistic Member of Parliament, who shares her values, unlike her husband, who believes in money-making above all. Sehgal gives an authentic picture of high-level politicians and bureaucrats, wrapped up in their cocktail parties, worried more about themselves than about the problems which face the country. The mutual attraction between Simrit and Raj is not primarily sexual. As in her other novels, Sehgal suggests that marriage is not just a sexual relationship, it means companionship on equal terms. She pleads for a basic honesty in human relationships, whether they are between man and woman or the ruler and the ruled.

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Because of her birth and upbringing, Sehgal makes an ideal spokesman for the western-educated Indian who finds it difficult to come to terms with India. As her character Sanad in *A Time to Be Happy* confesses, "I don't belong entirely to India. I can't. My education, my upbringing, and my sense of values have all combined to make me an Indian.... Of course there can be no question of my belonging to any other country." Jawaharlal Nehru, too, had articulated the same problem when he wrote in his autobiography, "I have become a queer mixture of the East and the West, out of place everywhere, at home nowhere. Perhaps my thoughts and approach to life are more akin to what is called Western than Eastern, but India clings to me as she does to all her "children, in innumerable ways." This realization leads to a passionate concern with the Indian heritage and its meaning in the modern age; all of Sehgal's novels are concerned with the present decadence of India, and how creative use can be made of its past. It is this concern with the country which led her to protest against the Emergency imposed by her cousin Indira Gandhi when the majority of Indian writers preferred to keep silent. Her political acumen had led her to anticipate Mrs. Gandhi's action, and she had cautioned against it in her weekly newspaper column. *Rich Like Us*, which won the Sinclair prize for fiction, is probably her best novel. Sehgal's searching look at India during the Emergency reveals that democracy and spirituality are only skin-deep. The murder of the narrator Somali's great-grandmother in the name of suttee, the mutilation of the sharecropper because he asks for his due, the rape of the village women by the police because their men folk dare to resist the landlord, and the murder of Rose, the large-hearted English woman in New Delhi just because her frank talk is an embarrassment to her stepson Dev, are all described in an entirely credible manner. The narrative technique is interesting; the narrator is Sonali, but alternate chapters deal (in the third person) with her father Keshav's friend Ram, a businessman who loves Rose, so we get a dual perspective on events. The novel ends on a note of hope; in the midst of sycophancy, there are persons like Kishori Lal, a petty shopkeeper, who have the courage to protest against tyranny. Sehgal's subsequent novels go back to the past. *Plans for Departure* has been hailed as a "novel of ideas," though a less sympathetic reviewer has labeled it a "backdated Jewel in the Crown." The usual Raj characters are present in the imaginary hill station of Himapur—the sympathetic British administrator, the missionary, the racist white woman out to uphold Imperialistic glory, the nationalist Indian leader etc. The heroine is Anna Hansen, a Danish woman on a visit to India, who makes her plans for departure when the shadows of World War I fall over Europe. She goes back to marry Nicholas Wyatt, the scion of an old English family. Anna's Indian experiences reach a kind of consummation when their son marries an Indian girl who is a political activist. The India of the early decades of this century is evoked more vividly in Sehgal's eighth novel, *Mistaken Identity*, which has a male narrator, just like her first novel, *A Time to Be Happy*. Bhushan Singh, the playboy son of the Raja of Vijaygarh, is on his way home from college in America in 1929 when he is arrested on a mistaken charge of sedition.

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He has to spend almost three years in jail, where his companions are idealistic followers of Mahatma Gandhi and militant trade union leaders, both trying to win freedom in their own ways; the hero's interaction with them is at times quite comic. These two later novels show Sehgal's continued preoccupation with India, though they lack the social commitment and contemporary relevance of *Rich like Us*.

Sehgal's representation of Indian society takes for granted the active role educated women are expected to play in politics, business, management and economy. However, Sahgal equates the possibility of women's professional participation in any sector of activity, and the corresponding possibility of liberation, with the accompanying development of a socialist project for postcolonial India. In this way, Sehgal links the historical processes set in motion with the transition to an independent India to a deep social transformation, which would naturally have effects on women's condition, as well. Indian postcolonial thus amounts to an open project, where new roles for women should evolve together with a more general change in Indian mentalities. It is in this sense that one of the main characters, Sonali, remembers her father's vow of confidence on the dawn of independence: "Women like you, are going to Indianise India", meaning, in this context, the re-creation of an independent Indian identity, free from British colonialism. But, it also means that educated, trained women were undeniably expected to have a role in the reconstruction of India's renewed identity, and one that was not contained within the domestic sphere. On a meta-level, it is important to point out that the above "vow of confidence" for the future of post-colonial India is coherent throughout the whole novel. The confluence of colonialism and female oppression makes the formulation of the project for a postcolonial future the ground for the liberation of women.

How to defend a reform of women's roles, being critical of India's traditions, without seeming anti-nationalist? Sehgal is careful to specify in several passages of the novel, often through the two main women characters (Sonali and Rose), that she defends an adapted kind of socialism, integrated with India's ways. This leaves the negotiation of India's role models within the frame of political organization. Within the frame of Sehgal's arguments, the contradiction between changing sexiest traditions and the assertion of India's cultural identity would be settled by socialism because this ideology expects from women a modern, active participation in society, meaning the socialist "nation" would automatically settle women's issues. But the socialist option does not correspond to the glimpse of postcolonial India represented in *Rich Like Us*. Instead, the Emergency holds on to traditional mentalities, and explains why India's fragmented social landscape will probably remain unchanged among high caste communities, like the Kashmiri Brahmins. The links between caste and power, being caste inherited by birth for males and by marriage for women, explains the strength of gendered codes. But first, and following Sehgal's guidance to learn "*India's ways*", let us look at the options open before high caste women. Sonali is one of the main women characters in

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the novel. The construction of this character, an alter ego of Sehgal, is defined by contrast to traditional models of feminine identity. It is in relation to Sonali's unorthodoxy that the - direction of the post-independence change regarding traditional feminine identities in India can be discussed. While following differences between Sonali and other women characters like Mona, Nishi and Kiran, one is settling the traditional gender norms that are expected to accommodate these changes. Sehgal seems to be saying that it is precisely because of the cultural logic opposing marriage to career, pervasive in more conservative views of Indian womanhood, that the moment young Sonali decides to study hard is the moment this same character senses she wants to "opt out" of marriage. The whole episode is presented lightly, as an anecdote, which confers to it an elegance it otherwise would not have had if it were to be engulfed by an exemplary tone. Yet, the "option" between being married by one's relatives or investing in one's personal projects is a key issue in the promotion of feminist awareness, especially in the context of high caste Hindu families who traditionally married their daughters very young, investing less in women's high education than they could afford. Sonali recalls the wedding of her friend Bimmie as a moment of self-discovery, regarding what is expected of brides and women.

Her novels from *A Time to be Happy* to *Mistaken Identity* show her deep concern with the parlous state of women in the parochial society. Her women from her prototype Maya to the mother figure Ranee in *Mistaken Identity* rise against the stultifying culture which impedes women's progress and rebel against all attempts to elide women's pivotal role in the family and society. Her women are victims of a conventional society which does not permit women to hold their own and considers the very issue of identity-crisis as preposterous apropos women. Betty Friedan noted that women could never ask questions like who am I? and what do I want?

For women as for men, the need for self-fulfillment, autonomy, self-realization, independence, individuality, self-actualization is as important as the sexual need, with as serious consequences when it is thwarted. Sehgal's first two women Maya and Rashmi are still women in stasis but the next three protagonists of Sehgal-- namely Saroj, Simrit and Devi -- mark a clear advancement from the point of view of self-determination. Despite all their initial hesitance, when Saroj and Simrit break free from the shackles of oppression there is no remorse. Quest for identity may be a Herculean task in a patriarchal society but once women have strong will and determination, they act as real "Shaktis". Maya and Rashmi are products of a parochial society where women are so conditioned that it is not without a sense of guilt that they pursue their goals away from their home. Sehgal does not subscribe to this approach.

She declares: "It takes half of life to achieve personhood but there is no greater glory". In her last three novels we come across women who disseminate the concept of freedom and self-realization and more importantly they do so without the supporting crutches

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of their male-friends. They refuse to abide by the fossilized concept of male-supremacy and seek to deflate male superiority successfully unaided by a man. In a male-dominated society these women hoist the flag of gender-equality and seek carte blanche for their race. Jasbir Jain aptly observes: "Anna's travels are part of her quest for freedom and meaning". Here is a woman whose visions of self-assertion are not clouded by conventions. She knows not only what she wants but also how to achieve it. Sehgal, though not a militant feminist, feels strongly about female-exploitation and male sarcasm toward the issue of women's identity crises. She demands social justice for women, her focus being on freedom. Sehgal's fictional women challenge the moth-eaten pretence of tradition without suffering from loss of identity: "On the contrary they seem to gain or acquire some kind of individuality". They threaten the stranglehold of men and reaffirm their faith in their potentials. The battle that starts quite demurely with Maya keeps advancing and gathering momentum through Rashmi, Saroj, Simrit and Devi and in Sonali it reaches its culmination. Anna and the ranee take it to its glorious heights. Sree Rashmi Talwar's suggestion seems to overlook the powerful presence of the ranee.

Our society conditions young girls to believe that Real Life consists of getting married having children, promoting one's husband's career by planning huge, endless meals for overfed people, buying the latest model of this and that and so-forth. Thus, Sehgal delineates the helplessness of Indian women and indifference of society to their plight in marriage. Judith Butler in Gender Trouble points out: "The woman in marriage qualifies not as an identity but only as a relational term that both distinguishes and binds the various clans to a common but internally differentiated matrilineal identity."

"A woman may say that she diets, exercises and dresses for herself, but in reality she is probably shaping and adorning her flesh for men. A woman little or no say about when, where, how or by whom her body will be used." The situation is supported by what Indu says in Deshpande's Roots and Shadows: "It's a trap...What marriage is? A trap? Or a cage...with two trapped animals glaring hatred at each other...Isn't so wrong after all. And it's not a joke, but a tragedy. But what animal would cage it?"

Nayantara Sehgal has dealt with the traditional marriage with all its traits in all of her novels. Her descriptions are so graphic realistic to... with so much of compassion understanding and details that Nayantara Sehgal conveys her conviction that Indian women woes are very much caused by the way women take their very personal matter in a very impersonal way. In traditional concept of marriage the role of mother also works out very prominently for accepting marriage as an auspicious thing in a girl's life. Marriage is considered by mothers as the be all and end all in a girl's life. They want to mould their girls according to their desires. In this way these mothers appear as authority figures stifling the daughters in the name of conforming to traditional values. Sehgal has beautifully portrayed these traditional mothers in her novels. Nita's mother, in This Time of Morning, and also the

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mother of Rashmi in this novel and the mother of Sonali in *Rich Like Us* confirm Sehgal's hypothesis.

Sehgal presents the image of traditional mothers in the above two novels, they want their daughters to be a "good girl" and "properly married". Simone de Beauvoir says that a "generous mother who sincerely seeks her child's welfare, will as a rule think it is wiser to make a true woman of her since society will more readily accept her if this done."

In the traditional marriage the notion of beautiful girl works out very prominently. As men prefer beautiful girls in their marriage, so if a girl is beautiful it is considered that she will be married to a wealthy groom, which is a symbol of her complete happiness. It shows in our traditional society the male biasness in marriage so unabashedly as in the fact that the girl should be beautiful to look at, that she should on no account be given a crooked nose, uneven teeth or a double chin. In other words, she has no freedom, to appear as she is. Desire for self-beautification, is a massive concession to what a man dreams and longs for. There is a tremendous preoccupation with physical appearance which works with a girl as well as her groom and his family. We find this notion working in Dev's marriage in *Rich Like Us* arranged by Mona his mother. She prefers a snow fair complexion girl to her son Dev for his marriage. Ironically, women do help in creating ethnic and racial boundaries by giving them names and identities but their own identities remain suspect, anonymous and insignificant to men. The 'power-politics' is always working as motive in the relation of man and woman reducing the status of a woman to merely a utility item, an object for decoration, for possession and for man's sexual gratification. In her article, "Women's Liberation: The Indian Way," Sehgal recognizes "women-power" but laments that Indian society has still not accepted this notion. Ours is a patriarchal society, where personality is a luxury for women. The need of the time is: A whole new look at woman "not as the property of father, husband or son, and dependent on their bounty but as valuable human material to be brought to full flower and full participation in her life and events".

The Novel of Nayantara Sehgal has beautifully delineated the effect of patriarchy or male culture in marriage rather with critical graphicness. She has shown in her novels that it decides the whole life of a girl in the desired direction of patriarchy. She succeeds in convincing us that women are assigned such roles as will best satisfy men's dreams and fantasies about them and thus blasts this malady by presenting women not in their flesh and blood but as men's imaginative projections about them.

Thus in this proposed research work I would try to establish that in Nayantara Sehgal's novels human values come to the fore as the driving force. People's commitment is engaged through appeals to "freedom", "equality" and the like. The women in her novels are well on their way to move from the feminine or feminist face to the face of displacement and self discovery.

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