

Religious Impact on Female characters in the Fiction of Nayantara Sahgal

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Abstract

In this present society a woman is expected to be passive and to accept the complicated role of males in her life. Women are supposed to be respected and kept comfortable in specific settings. In some areas, women are expected to do all of her home responsibilities. This is due to the Hindu law which puts women in such a place. Sahgal explores the impact of religion on her characters. She is for women emancipation from the religious dogma that tries to suppress women. The novel's female characters behave in ways that defy conventional wisdom. Sahgal criticizes Hinduism for its push to make women slaves. She was against old Hindu practices that reduced women to servitude. This is why she is antagonistic toward Gandhi and Tagore. However, she is more in tune with Swami Vivekananda's concern for women's economic freedom and self-sufficiency. Women are shown in Sahgal's book through the prism of both the ancient and contemporary understandings of Hinduism.

Keywords: Religion and women, Sahgal, Hinduism

Introduction

In this present society a woman is expected to be passive and to accept the complicated role of males in her life. Somehow, throughout subsequent centuries, this high position of a woman has devolved into a disgraceful one. Women also continue to be paradoxical in their portrayal. Women are supposed to be respected and kept comfortable in specific settings. In some areas, it is said that regardless of whether her husband accepts her care, a woman is expected to do all of her home responsibilities. Throughout her lifespan, a woman is expected to be cared for by a man. A woman is characterized in economic terms, as a commodity or a product. She must constantly be under one or the other's protection or control. Additionally, the widow's position is precarious and frightening socially. It is unsurprising that women would choose death over a life of degradation. A widow is ostracized, labelled as impure and wicked, and denied the right to maintain an aesthetically attractive look. She is supposed to suffocate her body till death. Under these conditions, a woman wants to die before to her husband's death as a "sumangali," receiving all of her husband's glories. These notions are rightly questioned by Nayantara Sahgal.

Women in the Hindu Society

In Hindu culture, a peculiar contradiction exists, although previous traditions revered women as goddesses, the same tradition never hesitates to crush them beneath its feet. Women must make many adjustments in order to live in this unfair and repressive environment. They are socialized to see pain as a kind of sacrifice. The majority of Indian women present a façade of happiness as a result of the excessive, masochistic pride they get from suffering.

This paper examines how Nayantara Sahgal views women in the Indian setting. Sahgal conveys the sense of being concerned about the Hindus' overall passivity. They may not seem to be as concerned with contemporary civilizational issues. Inequity, inequality, and discrimination do not convert into action in society. Their philosophical worldview, which has been passed down through generations, assigns them a subjective value based on their lot. Raj, a Christian convert, watches their indifference or passion objectively.

He asks, "Did Hindus have my personal and private emotions that were unrelated to institutions like family, caste, and the trodden path for the last 2000 years or more?" (84th Indian Renaissance) Simrit in *Storm in Chandigarh*, despite her education, contemporary thinking, and feminist ideals, is unable to break free from the age-old rut of traditional beliefs and fight on its own behalf against the injustices imposed on her directly by her husband's Divorce Settlement. She wants a companion, a guy, one who is sympathetic and empathic. Sahgal longs for Hinduism to emerge from its pure philosophical musings and confront the realities of life, imbuing it with the spirit of action, of combat. "That was the miracle Hinduism must accomplish today, touching and transforming the lives of millions and providing them with a foundation for action, not just a text and a ritual," Sahgal writes (85).

Sahgal believes that this battling attitude was particularly necessary in the current situation. She laments piteously: "In 1978, any study of Hinduism should make our skin crawl at the way we stand by and witness limited and casual oppression via caste, as well as at the acceptance of injustice that the mere concept of caste imposes on our mind" (85).

Heroines in the Novel

Rich Like Us is the tale of two women, Rose and Sonali, who symbolize the species of the New Woman against a sparse political backdrop. Recently, due to the impact of western education a discernible transformation can be found in Indian women. "Women's emancipation" has been the century's slogan. Women are becoming conscious of their self-fulfillment desires and discovering that the path forward requires them to reject the current social structure, the established social order. The emotional and physical torments they endure throughout their fight are the primary focus of Sahgal's books.

Self-fulfillment or pleasure takes precedence over the conventional notion of self-sacrifice for the happiness of others. Sahgal argues that although this humanitarian mindset may seem edifying, it is abnormal. In some ways, this self-fulfillment is a more effective method of helping others. One may offer her best rather than forcing an unfinished self on others and being a burden. Sahgal's early books, *A Time to be Happy* and *This Time of Morning*, depict women who cherish chastity, acceptance, and compromise

while possessing an inquiring spirit. Her subsequent books, *Storm in Chandigarh*, *The Day in Shadow*, *A Situation in New Delhi*, and *Rich like Us*, demonstrate a very adventurous attitude in which her female protagonists are unafraid to defy convention, transcend age-old insurmountable barriers, and forge their own lives. Her women characters usher in a new morality, one in which the idea of chastity is not limited to the physical. It is a question of both heart and mind. Women's true independence is defined by their emotional and mental attitudes, not by their economic freedom.

Saroj wants Vishal's companionship in order to fill a communication gap in her. Inder confines his wife Saroj, forbidding her from moving with Vishal, in order to get sexual contact with Mara. Sahgal condemns males who engage in sex relationships on the basis of a double standard. Sahgal depicts both nice and evil women. Saroj and Simrit, although adhering to the conventional Hindu dharma, are not chaste; they own their own morality. Outside of marriage, their quest is not for sex alone, but for friendship and individual respect. However, ladies such as Leela, Mara, and Gauri cannot make this claim. Leela is fundamentally dishonest and hypocritical; Mara, on the other hand, loves passionate sex. The issue with these individuals is their yearning for liberty in trivial matters. Through Vishal, Sahgal expresses his thoughts on honesty. He envisions a future in which "there must be another way of living with unflinching honesty in which the only cruelty is patience" (*The Storm in Chandigarh* 220). He counsels Saroj not to let her treasured uniqueness to be snuffed out. Simrit believes that sexual love should enshrine any act in the marriage connection, which is why Som's sex is a matter of its own, a bodily satiation.

Saroj is a strong-willed individual. Inder's mistreatment and insults have done nothing to dampen her spirits. Her unflinching demeanor, on the other hand, frightens him. He is perplexed as to why his calculated insults have no impact on her. This also occurs with Simrit. Simrit would have been forgiven by Som if she had succumbed to his assault. Her composure nearly scares him, and his brutality increases in an attempt to drive her to her knees.

Sahgal is unafraid to criticize women like Leela, who is dishonest enough to maintain a false façade of honesty via deceit, and Gauri, who has nothing to say about her husband's adulterous affairs for sex alone. On the other side, Mara abandons her husband, perhaps because he is too secure. She wants to possess both the tenderness of Jit and the brusqueness of Inder. As a result, Mara and Leela lack the inner strength necessary to maintain their balance. Mara, on the other hand, sees her error and returns to her own spouse, understanding that Jit alone is capable of rescuing her from her emotional knot.

Sahgal critiques society's double standard, which views the excesses of men and women in starkly different ways, most of which are negative to women. While for many, such breaching of boundaries is regarded normal or at the very least unremarkable, for a woman, even a small offense is a severe crime. Even when a woman is raped, the women and the victim inside her are blamed. Instead of expressing sympathy for the unfortunate child, her own parents see her with disdain, as filthy, unclean, and immoral. Adhu decides to burn herself to death in *A Situation in New Delhi* after being raped by a gang of university students and receiving no compassion from anybody. All this once again points out to the antithetical characters that Nayantara Sahgal creates.

Fault Finding

Sahgal criticizes Indians for their indifference to pain, which she directly attributes to the fatalistic, philosophic mentality fostered by our old heritage. In contrast, she is taken by Vivekananda's exhortations, who is no less a Vedic scholar, when he declares that football is a more essential pastime for a young man than even studying the Gita. Sahgal is a firm believer that religious attitudes contribute significantly to understanding both the emotional and political suffering of the people, impairing their ability to act decisively and responsibly in all spheres of life. She attempts to connect this self-imposed helplessness to the insufficient religion upon which these people live. Religion influences activity in a variety of ways, and far from becoming a credo of action, Hinduism, she argues, becomes a dogma of denial. At times, as is the case in a selfish, greedy, male-dominated culture, it becomes a weapon of exploitation in the hands of the unscrupulous. Sahgal's books are primarily concerned with the person, and religion serves as the primary motivator, or inhibiting factor, as Sahgal sees it. That is why Sahgal assists religion in determining its positive and negative aspects.

Sahgal is outspoken in his criticism of Hinduism's perplexing "uncertainty." "You cannot embrace Hinduism completely without retaining ignorance and superstitions," she asserts. (*This Time of Morning* 82).

However, there is no basis for single-handedly criticizing Hinduism for superstition or ignorance. It is not certain that any religion in the world is without flaws and demonstrates the certain, good path to freedom and redemption. When the fundamental concept of Karma asserts that the pain a person experiences in this life is a consequence of his prior deeds in a previous birth. According to her, it simply fosters resignation or apathy. Mona does nothing but blame the all-powerful and her destiny for her current predicament. (*Rich Like Us* 54) Vishal laments "the lack of bravery to bring what we deem holy up to the light and analyze it, to discard it if necessary" in *Storm in Chandigarh* (92). The Hindu race is "silent, obedient, allowing anything to happen to it from a nation, to a woman's mind and body." (37) Raj, a Christian in *The Day in Shadow* who can observe a Hindu's attitude objectively, wonders whether Hindus truly believe in anything to the extent that they would feel compelled to act if that belief is crushed or violated, for he has painfully come to believe that nothing, absolutely nothing, can motivate Hindus to take corrective action of any kind. Acceptance of whatever occurs to them comes as naturally as an overpowering attitude toward them (145). This acceptance is the consequence of inactivity, since Hinduism is incapable of being translated into action. It may devolve into inhumane behavior (13). Sahgal demonstrates that Hindus, by their fatalistic mentality engendered by tradition, by remaining silent and indifferent to pain, do more damage than those who are indifferent to religion.

Another feature of Hinduism, according to Sahgal, is an excessive concern with the otherworldliness, with the hereafter, to the exclusion of the here and now, which enables avoidance, acceptance, and complacency in the face of current suffering. She is equally scathing about the Hindus' retrograde tendencies. "I believe our grandma has a significant impact on what we do," Vishal adds. Mara Sahgal declares: "It is ours, although part of it is rotting." We will perish if we continue in this manner. At times,

I believe we have already died" (Storm in Chandigarh 138). This ancient legacy makes no beneficial contribution to everyday living.

Sahgal makes abundantly apparent that Hinduism must constantly reinvent itself in order to be a living force. It can only be accomplished via a constant assessment of what constitutes a desirable virtue in the current environment. A code of conduct may be established "at this specific point in our history when we must act and accept responsibility for our actions." As T.S. Eliot puts it, the past should educate the present, what he refers to as "the pastness of the past but its presence" (Woman's Space: Margaret Drabble and Nayantara Sahgal 102).

Priorities should be realigned by focusing on the individual's welfare in the here and now rather than on irrelevant, irrational concerns such as caste consideration, cow slaughter, and so on. This is precisely what Gandhi wanted to do. Gandhi was certain that the individual must learn to "adapt his Individualism to the needs of societal development" (*The Fiction of Nayantara Sahgal* 91)

Gandhi declares, "If I had the good fortune to meet someone like him (the Buddha), I would not hesitate to inquire as to why he did not preach a gospel of labor rather than one of contemplation." Blind devotion to religious beliefs depletes the capacity for independent thought. Sahgal's female characters are not bound by any set of conformity or moral standards other than their own opinion. Sahgal criticizes the pessimist or the issue at hand. In Gandhian renunciation, she discovers action, not lethargy. However, she would argue that abstinence is unnatural and results in dispersed individuals. That is what she is attempting to get from Kunti Behan, whose self-imposed rigid discipline has resulted in the development of a twisted person. There is an underlying tone of dissatisfaction expressed as a result of natural aspirations being denied.

Sahgal would not advocate for self-control or renunciation, despite its value. Individuals are expected to take decisive action to halt the spread of social ills. She writes of renunciation, "It causes a man to withdraw and do nothing in situations when he should accept moral responsibility, confront reality, and stand strong" (*The Day in Shadow* 177).

Sahgal would stress the karma or action component of the Gita's nishkamya karma doctrine. Vishal urges the Chief Minister not to succumb to violence, but to take decisive action against bad forces. Religious sentiment, which is strong and pervades all facets of a man's life, should be transformed into a dynamic force. "They should be developed to produce results in order to become a song on one's lips, a source of tremendous combat power (201)". As shown in Saroj and Simrit, Sahgal exhorts women to leave their habitations and fears, redefining their religion and defilement in the face of exploration.

Rashmi decides to abandon the façade of a happy marriage and begin over with Rakesh (*This Time of Morning*). Saroj makes a similar choice to divorce his wife and seek Vishal's companionship (*Storm in Chandigarh*). Simrit perceives a similar loving attitude in Raj's life outside his marriage. (*The Shadow of Day*). Devi would not succumb to political pressures, but would leave her position and forge her own path. She, together with Usman, who has resigned as Vice Chancellor in order to associate freely with the people

and fight for spiritual liberty, initiates a popular movement against the Establishment. While such courageous acts are rare and few between, Sahgal argues that they do offer a silver lining amid the dark environment of indecision, irresponsibility, and avoidance.

Sahgal encourages individuals to do an objective examination of Hindu religious laws. It should not be afraid to reinterpret them in light of new, altered conditions in order to revitalize religion. In a letter, she writes: "I have seen it (Hinduism) as constraining in terms of emotional, spiritual, and intellectual growth, but only because people have misinterpreted it and its messages." I believe we will need to define what Hinduism is, its scope and limits, and only then will we be able to draw strength from it in the same way that a Christian, Muslim, or Sikh does (*The Fiction of Nayantara Sahgal* 118)

According to Sahgal, women must assert their independence from 'otherness via male culture. When this happens, a woman develops into an independent, self-contained creature. She is autonomous, engaged, and prepared to make her own decisions. Sahgal seems to concur completely with Simon de Beauvoir:

The liberated woman wants to be active; a taker, and rejects the passivity imposed by man. The contemporary woman embraces male ideals; she takes pleasure in thinking, acting, working, and producing on the same terms as men; rather than disparaging them, she proclaims herself to be their equal. (*Woman's Space: Margaret Drabble and Nayantara Sahgal's Mosaic World 2*)

Hindu edicts such as Manu Smriti, which defined the distinct worlds of man and woman, undoubtedly stifled the Indian lady's wings. Throughout her life, a woman was forced to depend on her father, spouse, or son. However, such a notion of subservience was absent from earlier Vedic writings. The ancients seem to have lauded gender equality. It is said that renowned philosophers, poets, and mathematicians such as Maitreyi and Gargi were respected and valued on an equal footing with men. However, this beneficial habit has been forgotten in practice. The fundamental ideas were abandoned, and people became fixated on useless rituals. For their own selfish gain, males started to impose discipline and control on women. Chauvinistic males would idolize Sita, the self-sacrificing heroine of the epic Ramayana, and impose similar discipline on women.

Antithetical Viewpoints

Sahgal would not quite agree with Tagore's or Gandhi's definitions of woman. Tagore thinks that "women are gifted with the passive qualities of virginity, humility, devotion, and the capacity for self-sacrifice in larger proportions than men are." (173) (Personality) For Sahgal, this is just a redefinition of the conventional Sita image. At most, such attitudes would result in meek, submissive animals. Women are incapable of constructive development or genuine self-fulfillment. Gandhi urged women to break out from their limited domains and join the national fight in huge numbers. He reasoned that the woman's noble character would provide a sense of balance, an emotional dimension, to the people's fight. As such, although both Tagore and Gandhi felt that women should participate in public life, they never envisioned her as an active, self-sufficient individual, preferring to highlight the polarization of the roles.

On the other side, Sahgal is far more taken with Swami Vivekananda's radical ideas than she is with Tagore and Gandhi. Vivekananda enquired, "How come there was such a division between men and women since Vedanta declares that all creatures have the same conscious self?" (Selections from Complete Works 445). Women in India have been relegated to the status of "mere industrial machines. Men's reckless nature has done nothing to further their cause. They would approach Manu Smrit's authority and "bound them to strict restrictions" (445). In ancient India, women such as Maitryi and Gargi, as well as female philosophers such as Sarasavani, were bright and ambitious. Vivekananda believed that the contemporary era's lack of such ladies was a result of women being denied education. He put his revolutionary theories into action. He was a firm believer in education's primacy. He suggested building a math (convent) in Belur and developed a curriculum that would not only teach information but also develop the skills necessary for women to achieve economic independence and self-sufficiency.

Conclusion

The women in the novel act in a particular way that is antithetical to the traditional understanding. The Hinduism that is thrust to make women a slave is called out by Sahgal. She was no for the ancient Hindu rituals that made women a slave. This is the reason she is not in terms with Gandhi and Tagore. But she is more in line with Swami Vivekananda who is more concerned about the economic independence and self-sufficiency of women. Women in Sahgal's novel are shown through the lens of the ancient understanding of Hinduism, and also through the modern way.

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