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## Female Characters in the Novels of Nayantara Sahgal

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**Abstract:** *Nayantara Sahgal shows her great concern to the subjection, exploitation and desecration of women in India's male dominated society. Her conception of husband-wife relationship too is based on humanism, morality and ideal love. She holds the view that man-woman relationship should be cordial; marriage a give-take partnership and married life, a co-sharing adventure. Nayantara Sahgal regrets to say that woman in India's male-oriented society has been reduced to secondary position. She encourages her women to resist, resent and defy the oppressions penetrated on them. She condemns the women who do not resent and let the things happen against them undisturbedly. According to Mrs. Nayantara Sahgal, there is vast difference between love and lust Whereas love implies mutual understanding, lust is a physical desire. She states that love, sex, marriage and domestic life are interconnected, hence be maintained properly in a balanced manner. It is justifiable for a woman to react to the instinct of love positively, without the ingredient of lust.*

**Key Words:** Love, relationship, lust, society, feminism, struggle, freedom, money, maintained, justifiable.

Nayantara Sahgal's feminist stance can be accessed by reading her novels meticulously. Her leanings towards feminism are quite marked in some of the novels viz. Storm in Chandigarh, The Day in shadow, A Situation in New Delhi, and a little mildly in other novels. She is attempted to introduce female characters who struggle hard for selfhood and identity. The truth is realized "When one studies the undeserved ill-treatment a large number of her women characters in these novels have to undergo in the society, and tries to know why they are driven to commit suicide or to seeking divorce, or to undergoing torments defenselessly when it becomes inevitable."

Nayantara Sahgal shows her great concern to the subjection, exploitation and desecration of women in India's male dominated society. According to M.K. Naik, "In her novels Mrs. Nayantara Sahgal has raised some basic problems pertaining to personal relationship, and her portrayal of politics is just a part of her humanistic concern because it reveals her deep insight into human psyche."

Nayantara Sahgal's conception of husband-wife relationship too is based on humanism, morality and ideal love. She holds the view that man-woman relationship should be cordial; marriage a give-take partnership and married life, a co-sharing adventure. She writes, "If I could convince one person of my acquaintance before I die that the world consists of human beings and not of men and women in water tight compartments, I'd count it an achievement." Shyam M. Asnani interprets this view and comments, "...she stands for the new humanism and a new morality, according to which woman is not to be taken as a mere toy, an object of lust and momentary pleasure, but man's equal and honoured partner, in word and deed, as against the inhuman, traditional postures." She believes that man-woman relationship is the unit of family and social life.

Nayantara Sahgal regrets to say that woman in India's male-oriented society has been reduced to secondary position. She does not agree with the long established views that she is supposed completely to give up her individuality in love as well as marriage. She is surprised to note that for men these things mean only self-gratification on all fronts. Highlighting this state of affairs Neena Arora writes, "For a woman love means complete emotional involvement with the man. She wants lasting and stable relationship and permanence. Man looks upon sex as a means of self-gratification and sensual pleasure whereas woman relates it to the emotional fulfillment and meaning in life."

As Mrs. Nayantara Sahgal perceives a Woman is only a "figure of humility?", "neck bent and down-cast?". She is supposed to be only a domestic servant. Man loves her, no doubt, but he loves as if she were meant for that purpose.



Surprisingly enough, they live together, love each other and even blessed with children but there is no mutual respect between them because she is not regarded as an honoured member of the family.

Nayantara Sahgal, like other women novelists viz. Anita Desai, Kaniala Das, Shashi Deshpande and Nargis Dalal projects the changing facets of man-woman relationship in India. Her women have emerged as smart and dynamic persons who act as living individuals striving for self-assertion. She does not find favour with those men who keep their wives as servants. She writes, It is not a question of generosity or its lack. It is a perfect denial of plain justice, the justice one dispenses even to stranger, even to the enemy when the war is over. Mrs. Nayantara Sahgal is altogether opposed to those who have greed for money, which sometimes creates great trouble between husband and wife. In the novel *The Day in Shadow* Som is mad after money. Money is more substantial for him than his wife. He spares no time to spend with his wife. They have no understanding between them. So their marriage results into divorce. Nayantara Sahgal writes: Money had been part of life texture of her relationship with Som, an emotional, forceful ingredient of it, intimately tied to his self-esteem. Money was, after all, a form of pride, even of violence. Mrs. Nayantara Sahgal encourages her women to resist, resent and defy the oppressions penetrated on them. She condemns the women who do not resent and let the things happen against them undisturbedly. Nayantara Sahgal scolds those women who remain mute and submissive. She advises them to meet the challenges boldly. She prefers divorce and extra-marital relationship to unhappy married life. She appreciates Simrit's love affair with Raj who is a good-hearted person. Simrit says: **"If I'd known you well before my divorce, there might not have been any divorce, knowing you would have taken care of one and need not marry another."**

Raj is a person who understands his partner's feelings. He seems to exemplify R.W. Connell's view that: **"Man.....enjoy patriarchal power, but accept it as if it were given to them by an external force, by nature or convention or even by women themselves, rather than by an active social subordination of women going on here and now."**

Extra-marital love affair, according to Mrs. Nayantara Sahgal, is not bad until and unless it effects family life adversely. Her men and women like Raj, Sumer Singh, Shaila, Pixie and Simrit are found indulged in extra-marital relationship. On this ground she condemns traditional orthodox and the so-called civilized Indians who want to maintain status quo and do not welcome any change to be brought about in the position of women. The novel under reference is personalized in the sense that Mrs. Nayantara Sahgal herself had to suffer humiliation after her divorce. She admits:

**"In this book I tried to figure out some that has happened to me - the shattering experience of divorce. I wanted to show how even in a free country like ours, where women are equal citizens, a woman can be criminally exploited without creating a ripple..."**

In Mrs. Nayantara Sahgal's third novel *Storm in Chandigarh* the three pairs of husband and wife-Nikhil and Gauri, Inder and Saroj, and Jit and Mara present altogether different pictures regarding love. Inder loves Saroj only to satisfy his sexual needs otherwise they live almost like strangers. Commenting on their life style Shyam Asnani writes, "Love to him, means possession, sex, hurried hot sex which comes easily and satisfactorily to him from Saroj." Gauri Asserts that family life, cannot be enjoyed fully and happily until and unless it is based on respect and mutual understanding. She condemns loveless sex, which- .....is an act with a beginning and an end, a need never be put into words, nearly enacted and dispensed with in darkness. There are no traces of it to account for in the morning... According to Mrs. Nayantara Sahgal, there is vast difference between love and lust Whereas love implies mutual understanding, lust is a physical desire. Love is related with soul, it is a loyalty for each other, and faith in each other. Like man, woman should be allowed freedom in love making.

Mrs. Nayantara Sahgal asserts that in that case woman will realize her responsibility and will not go astray. Supporting Nayantara Sahgal's views regarding love-making Asnani writes, "a woman is a person in her own right and Mrs. Nayantara Sahgal is sure that she will adjust herself physically and emotionally to the meaning of the



freedom." For Mrs. Nayantara Sahgal, love is a precious jewel. But a majority of people never understand its value. However her new women recognize the universal appeal of love. Love is private and precious; it is a shrine to beauty. It never runs smooth.

Mrs. Nayantara Sahgal is vehemently opposed to the discrimination made between a male child and female child. She is embarrassed to write that if anything wrong befalls a girl, people do not resist its, on the contrary, they take it to be a blot on her moral character. If she falls a victim to rape, she has to suffer hardships in her later life. Any boy, if he is acquainted with her case, will not easily, readily and whole heartedly accept her as his wife. So far as the girl's parents are concerned, they try to get her married off as soon as possible so as to avoid defamation. Nayantara Sahgal remarks: **"The girl's parents won't see or talk to anyone about it. They don't want more publicity for what is already an intolerable disgrace."**

Mrs. Nayantara Sahgal is an upholder of free love-making but at the same time she asserts that feelings of love should not mar the happy life of a family. In the novel *This Time of Morning*, Nayantara Sahgal creates such characters who do not hesitate in discussing their love-affairs freely and frankly. Rakesh, Rashmi, Dr. Narang Saily's brother and Saira talk of love and express their love affairs openly even in clubs and parties. Rakesh is a philanderer who, loves Leela and Rashmi. Once when he comes back from Beirut, Dr. Narang's first question put to him is, "...How were the girls in Beirut ? and "would have hugged Rashmi but for the table between them." Similar is the case of Saily's brother who kisses, Saira deeply. Binny, the youthful daughter of Dheeraj is ever an object of discussion because of her "ever bursting out? of her Kameez". She is an ultra-modern girl seemingly in the wings. Her craze for fashion attracts people to love her. Rashmi, though married, is also found, drinking and flirting with a young man named Neil.

Similar is Leela-Rakesh episode. They love each other so warmly that they meet every Sunday at the India centre to share cups of coffee.

Going out with men and strange have come upon her in a rush because she is pretty and always in demand... She turns out to Rakesh such times as the only recognizable human being in her bewildering new world.

On another spot one finds him longing to meet Rashmi. He is posted in Paris, he exclaims, "Paris is a city for lovers and it is unbearable to be without you (Rashmi). If you should change your mind, come to me here. No one can ever love you as I do." According to Mrs. Nayantara Sahgal's love and sex must naturally find expression and satisfaction, but should not shatter the happiness of the family.

Mrs. Nayantara Sahgal holds the opinion that nobody is ever too old to respond to the feeling of love. She states that love, sex, marriage and domestic life are interconnected, hence be maintained properly in a balanced manner. It is justifiable for a woman to react to the instinct of love positively, without the ingredient of lust. The conversation that takes place between Nayantara Sahgal and her mother justifies the urge of love. She says to her mother; I remember one of the women, a wonderful and worthwhile person who fell desperately in love when she was nearly fifty, with a man years younger. She tried to persuade him unsuccessfully that she had been his wife in a previous incarnation and that God now intended them to remarry. So you see how important it is to do things at the right time.

Nayantara Sahgal is a staunch supporter of true love. In the novel *Rich Like Us* she creates her prototype Rose who believes that ideal love consists of respect dignity and grace: Supporting her conception of love, Sanjogita Singh observes, "Complete fulfillment of her love is just as elusive as them mythical island. Right till the end she remains a compassionate, forthright person with sound commonsense, and practical, solid working-class values." The novel is a Sinclair Prize winner piece of literature and has been considered to be a very commendable work of art dealing with the socio-political issues. A few comments have been reproduced here under:

**"Complex and wide ranging its characters and its India linger in the mind."**

**--- The Observer "Funny, credible and startlingly intelligent. -----The Listener**



"A Fascinating book to read, from first to last. -----London Magazine

"Dry and sardonic . . . subtle, powerful" New Statesmen.

"The novel is wonderfully set apart by a fine, clear disenchanted eye and an acerbic moral intelligence that is devastating without ever razing its voice."

---- Publishers Weekly. "She is herself a leading example of India's emergent writers, blending the Hindu with the Christian outlook, possessed equally of a fool analytical brain and broadly Roman sympathies."  
The Times.

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