

**DR. M.S. KAMALA KUMARI**

**ASSISTANT PROFESSOR**

**DEPT OF ENGLISH & HUMANITIES, M.V.G.R.COLLEGE OF ENGINEERING**

**VIZIANAGARAM, A.P**

**INDIA**

**SUJATHA LOKANADHAM**

**ASSISTANT PROFESSOR**

**DEPT OF ENGLISH & HUMANITIES, M.V.G.R.COLLEGE OF ENGINEERING**

**VIZIANAGARAM, A.P**

**INDIA**

## **SLAYED BY PATRIARCHY: UNDERSTANDING NAYANTARA**

**SAHGAL'S**

**“A SITUATION IN NEW DELHI”**

### **Abstract**

Nayantara Sahgal, realized that women are born as free as men, but they are not allowed to remain free for long. In fact, as feminists asserted, the woman is made by society. As Simone de Beauvoir rightly said, one is not born but rather becomes a woman (de Beauvoir 249). It is civilization as a whole that produces this creature. In fact this is one of the ills of patriarchal society. Right from the feminine virtues and graces are so instilled in her that she forgets that she has an independent identity as a person. For man his will is law but for woman there are certain pre-ordained moulds into which she has to fit herself or else she is crushed and finished. She has to be perfect ‘angel in the house’ as called by Virginia Woolf. The patriarchal set up dwarfs the existence of women. It is believed that if women are to derive satisfaction it should be within the framework of their relationship with their husbands and their families. Even the faintest of any

such idea that all human beings, including women, exist primarily for the realization of one's self is considered preposterous.

Key words: Patriarchy, Feminine, Identity, Crushed, Framework, Satisfaction

As a woman novelist, Nayantara Sahgal recognizes that her obligation is that of advocating the emancipation of women. Delving deep into the female psyche in her novels she critically portrays contemporary social realities, of women's exploitation, corruption and extortion. Severely attacking Patriarchy she introduces her theme of the quest for freedom through her protagonists.

In *A situation in New Delhi*, Mrs. Sahgal describes a different kind of incompatibility through the delineation of the relationship between Usman Ali, the vice-chancellor of Delhi University and his wife Nadira. Usman needs a friendship not only with the body but also with the mind of a woman. But unfortunately Nadira is not with him "in his friendship and loyalties, in the passions of his mind and, heart, in central concern" (SND 33). He feels that she is durable as a "mistress material", but problematic as a wife. For him, she becomes a mere body without a mind. As Nadira is a voluptuous and languorous woman who longs only for the physical side of the marriage she becomes a mere body without a mind for Usman. Here Professor Harish is like Usman in Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* who is not satisfied with his wife Ganga, an illiterate and falls in sexual love with intelligent and educated woman Virmati.

In a fit of disappointment, Usman thus blames himself,

There was a peculiar humiliation in not being able to convey your truth, your essential personality to the person who lived under your roof, shared your bed, saw you in all your unguarded nakedness every single day: the person who had more evidence to condemn you than any other had, but who also had glimpses into your striving, your efforts at bravery... Yet really the failure was his wherever he might have succeeded, with Nadira he had failed. May be she had erected an Islamic fortress around her, imprisoned herself, a princess in a tower (SND 137).

In *Devi*, Usman can find what he needs in a woman, intelligence and receptivity, to ideas. Sexuality and sexual fulfillment are an essential part of human life. As Simone de Beauvoir aptly remarks, Sexuality most certainly plays a considerable role in human life; it can be said to

pervade life throughout (77). But Devi is duty-bounded to Shivaraj her brother; and she uses the men in her life only for her personal survival. It is once again with Nadira that Usman tries to establish the right relationship as she, like Jit in *Storm in Chandigarh*, has the redeeming feature of having a will to understand, even if understanding is not yet there. Though she stays away from him for sometimes, finally reconciles with him and returns to him.

The relationship between Usman and Nadira follows almost a similar pattern with one basic difference. Unlike Uma and Leela in *This Time of Morning*, Nadira is in love with her husband and wants to reach him, and the failure of their relationship is not due to any contrary pulls but to the limitations of their individual natures. But men do not have proper understanding of women. Theodor Reik says in his book *Many Faces of Sex: Observation of an Old Psychoanalyst*:

Why do we men not understand women even though they give us so much material by which to know them? we see them, we hear them, we even smell them, but all this is not enough because we can never be women. We always conclude that women understand men, but men don't understand women. It is a one-way traffic (102).

Nadira is both beautiful and desirable but, Usman's need is for a different kind of woman, one with intelligence and with receptivity to ideas. Nadira is more concerned with the physical side of marriage than with the exchange of ideas. Usman, however, had always gone beyond physical relationship. Usman blames himself for his failure in reaching his wife. Their relationship is saved by just one gesture of Nadira that she has the "will to understand, even if understanding wasn't Yet there" (138). This will, to understand had earlier saved Sanad and Kusum's relationship as also Jit and Mara's.

Young women in Sahgal's fictional world are the helpless victims of the taboo-ridden, conventional society. Instead of asserting themselves or fighting against the odds, some of them easily accept the role traditionally offered to them, while some others opt for death as the ultimate solution to the mundane man-made problems.

Madhu, a girl student in *A situation in New Delhi* after being raped by a group of university students in the Registrar's office, finds no sympathy from her parents or from the society, and ultimately chooses to burn herself to death. When she is hospitalized after the rape,

she cries in agony but the nurse puts her hand on her mouth to stop her, the gesture becomes symbolic of the authoritarian forces trying to stop the cries of innocent sufferers. In Shashi Deshpande's novel, *The Binding Vine*, Kalpana, a victim of patriarchy, is an unmarried, educated, modern, career young girl who gets raped in her attempt to live on her own. She hangs between life and death. Her mother is desperate. But the police officer takes little interest and tells her mother "why make it a case of rape, he asked? she is going to die anyway, so what difference does it make whether, on paper she dies the victim of an accident or of a rape?" (BV 88) The nurse and the police officer might be wise and experienced people who know women are to suffer in silence, and cries will make the matters only worse for the victim.

The noted Indian English Novelist Mulk Raj Anand feels:

No woman in our land is beyond the threat of rape, because of the suppressed energies of the male, through the taboos of patriarchy which deny sex before marriage and make male into wanton animals who assault any possible victim when possessed by lust (Anand 33).

The word rape is the most awful word in women's life. When a girl is raped she feels ashamed as she is helpless and unable to protect her own self. When Marikolanthu in Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupe* is raped, instead of showing sympathy, everyone blames her. Here Anita Nair tries to delineate the psychology of all the members male or female in society who try to find fault with the woman who has been exploited as she herself is regarded responsible for her tragedy. Sexual abuse and violence against women are treated as minor offences in the phallogocentric society. Kate Millet says,

Patriarchal force also relies on a form of violence particularly sexual in character and realized most completely in the act of rape. The figures of rapes reported are not only a fraction of those which occur, as the 'shame' of the event is sufficient to delay women from the motion of civil prosecution and the public circumstances of a trial. In rape, the emotions of aggression, hatred, contempt and the desire to break or violate personality, take a form consummately appropriate to sexual politics (44).

Mira from Shashi Deshpande's *The Binding Vine* was also a victim of physical abuse years ago but neither then nor now the mothers of these silent suffering victims stand by their

unfortunate daughters as they dare not to deny the norms of the society. While Mira's mother kept silent and stood helpless at the misery of her daughter, Kalpana's mother hovers over the family name. Shakutai's outbursts brings to light the partisan attitude prevalent in the patriarchal society. If a girl is raped, for fault of hers, she alone is censured, and victimized.

Through the incident of rape, Sahgal's purpose is not merely to depict the hooliganism and disorder in the educational institutions, but to show that a woman in a patriarchal set up has no place to go to once she is stigmatized. In the words of Adrienne Rich, it is not rape of the body alone but,rape of the mind as well (Rich 61). This incident is just an example of the reality of women's position in the society. According to Marcia P Liu "clearly Sahgal has very strong feelings about the wastage of young lives, especially women's lives" (Liu 51).In our social set-up, the parents of a girl do not act boldly and firmly out of fear of the society. Instead of bringing the guilty ones to law for punishment, they prefer to suppress the matter because they know all too well the hypocrisies of the society. Conforming to the social ways, they keep their daughters secure in the four walls of their house till they are handed over to their rightful masters.

Meena Usmani in her article *Violence against Women* remarks:

The women have frequently been ruthlessly exploited in our society and the problem is growing day by day. The case of eve teasing, sexual harassment, abduction, sati, rape and wife battering in public and at the workplace etc, have been more regularly reported since the 1960s and early 1970s, the issue of violence against women has become the public problem as women are discriminated at work, home and denied their due in every field. The constitution of India promises freedom, equality, opportunity and protection to women and give them several rights, in spite of that they enjoy an unequal status (13).

In a traditional society, women can be happy when blindly and unthinkingly accept their roles, assigned to them. Pinky, a happy girl, is very enthusiastic about her marriage and obediently consents to her parents's choice: "Girls like Pinky lived as their mother and grandmother had" (42). She does not know anything about sex or contraceptives. Her mother thinks, "It's rubbish, this modern business about knowing everything before you marry".(41) she probably forgets that due to the lack of sex- education, pinky would be soon drifting into

motherhood as she is drifting into marriage. Pinky is the unthinking type of character who has no regrets and willingly accepts the traditional role.

Pinky is very much conscious of her looks and figure and visits “Beauty Parlours to get her arms and legs done, leaving her skin with a polished look, not a hair in sight” (147). At home also she finds no other pastime than to care for her elbows and eyebrows. Pinky’s desire to look beautiful represents her submission to the patriarchal values according to which women are to be mere dolls for men (Raymond 25). Men mostly prefer doll-like beautiful girls as their wives who should always give them pleasure and never question any of their ideas or actions. Girls like Pinky help in perpetuating patriarchal set-up. But Sahgal does not approve of this type of women. Pinky remains a minor character. The central character in Sahgal’s novels is a thinking woman striving for an individual, independent personality.

Pinky’s friends Tazi and Reba are equally immature and very enthusiastic about the idea of marriage. Their conception of marriage is that one can live one’s “own life, away from prying supervision”(148). Ironically, these girls believe that “marriage was a change. At least you got out from under your parents”(148). For them marriage is an escape from the control of parents. These immature girls see marriage in terms of gaudy clothes, outings and lots of fun. They have no idea that marriage means only changing masters – first parents were there, now there will be husband. As Simone de Beauvoir observes:

There is a unanimous agreement that getting a husband – or in some cases a ‘protector’ – is for her the most important of undertakings.... She will free herself from the parental home, from her mother’s hold, she will open up her future not by active conquest but by delivering herself up, passive and docile, into the hands of a new master (de Beauvoir 352).

Girls like Pinky, Tazi and Reba cherish a rosy picture of marriage and are not at all aware of the obligations involved in this relationship. These purely feminine women, to use a phrase from Sheila Rowbotham, are unlike other intelligent and sensitive women of Sahgal. Discussing feminine women, Sheila Rowbotham observes:

The ‘feminine’ woman is making herself prey tries to reduce man,also, to her carnal passivity:she occupies herself in catching him in her trap,in enchaining him

by means of the desire she arouses in him in submissively making herself a thing (Rowbotham 718).

Pinky and other girls are as carefree as birds and are unaware of the other side of the life, which is full of complex problems – problems of understanding, adjustments etc. in marriage. Society, however, considers such girls an excellent species for making wives.

In *Devi*, Mrs. Sahgal portrays a completely different kind of a character. Usman, one of the lovers of *Devi*, “whose explorations of the past had included a study of the Indian woman from Vedic times, never knew quite how to classify *Devi*” (SND 22). She has not completely involved herself either in the matrimonial alliance with Iswar or in the extra-marital affairs with Usman and Michael. As a popular figure in the country she is the sister of the prime minister- she cannot openly defy the traditional mould. The only commitment of her is the sense of duty that she has to her brother, Shivraj. She thinks that she is unable to live with herself as she and her brother Shivraj are so much flesh of each other’s flesh, their very souls mixed. The other men with whom she has a close relationship, Michael and Usman, are simply used by her for her personal survival. *Devi* is an extraordinary woman for whom commitment is possible only with a man of great ideals, character and originality no doubt; she is also a human being who is in need of love and sex. But they are next only to the duty to her brother. Such a bold and strong woman is rare in the contemporary social set-up, critics like Jasbir Jain felt that her “character does not come to life in spite of the writer’s repeated attempts to give her vitality” (Jain 61).

Modern and liberal in outlook, Sahgal believes in new humanism and a “new morality, according to which woman is not to be taken as a sex object and glamour girl, fed of fake dreams of perpetual youth, lulled into a passive role that requires no individual identity, but as man’s equal and honoured partner. In Sahgal one can easily discern a happy blend of two sensitivities-- the sensitivity of an artist and the sensitivity of a humanist. As a humanist, she is for unfettered freedom and urges us to realize that human personality is a precious, hard- won achievement, worthy of nurture, irrespective of sex. She regrets that in this atomic age when monumental problems have been resolved by science and research, the human relationship still seems largely unresearched. She, therefore, pleads for the new marital morality based on mutual trust, consideration, generosity, and absence of pretence, selfishness and self-centeredness. Her artistic vision is intensely moral with profound respect for the affirmative values of life.

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