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Silence To Rebellion: Development Of Feminist Protester In Nayantara Sahgal Selected Novels

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Abstract

This paper critically examines the trajectory of feminist protest in Nayantara Sahgal's novels *A Time to Be Happy* (1958), *This Time of Morning* (1965), and *Rich Like Us* (1985). The study examines the development of female resistance through the text and theory of these works in an elaborate textual and theoretical analysis to outline a transitional point between vague psychological resistance and distinct political and personal disobedience. By placing the narratives of Sahgal in the larger socio-political scenario in the post-independence India, the present paper focuses on the interaction of gender, class and politics and bring to the fore the role of Sahgal as a feminist literary critic. Relying on feministic theories of such thinkers as Beauvoir, Crenshaw, Spivak, et al., the paper establishes the importance of literature as an effective expression force and the tool of developing feminist awareness.

Keywords: Feminist Resistance, Indian English Literature, Postcolonial Women's Writing, Autonomous Female Identity, Gender and Power Dynamics

I. INTRODUCTION

Nayantara Sahgal is considered to be one of the greatest writers in Indian English literature, memorable not only because of her strong adherence to representation but also of the complexity of Indian women living out their patriarchal systems. Through her literary body of work one can notice a continuation of an interest in the questions of identity, resistance, emancipation with a particular focus on the female experience in post-independence India. However, Sahgal does not limit female protest to one type, instead, her protagonists present a broad range of female protest, which goes all the way to the explicit level of socio-political protest (Gupta, 2012). The subtle nature of her descriptive work has brought her both fame as a novelist and that of a feminist thinker who turns to fiction as the means of socio-political expression.

The depth of the theme of the novels of Sahgal is directly associated with the historical and cultural setting in which these novels take place. Coming to the scene after the Indian independence, her writings are the record of changing Indian womanhood within the space of a new sovereign country with its traditional ideas and emerging new ambitions. With the transformation of Indian society due to urbanization and its other problems like political crises and feminist awakening, the Politics of female resistance in Sahgals literary works also changed. The earliest novels like *A Time to Be Happy* (1958) concentrate on the inharmonious inner struggles that plague the lives of women in conventional marital and family setups, whereas the later novels like *Rich*

Like *Us* (1985) manifest signs of an adult feminist awareness brought out in the form of aggressive and political resistance (Mukherjee, 2009; Sinha, 2017).

Here, fiction as feminist historiography Sahgal provides a set of descriptions of the evolutions of roles and consciousness of the Indian women in 30 years. Her heroines are not just fixed characters but are making progress as per their social and politico backgrounds like the changes happening in the real life of the ladies of the Indian society. Rajan (2015) argues that the stories developed by Sahgal are not only a reflection of such transformations, but they also play an active role in the development of the feminist discourse in India. Her writing legitimates the thought that literature is not an imitation of reality, but also a producer of reality and a critic of the same as well.

The three novels chosen to be studied in this paper, *A Time to Be Happy*, *This Time of Morning* (1965), and *Rich Like Us*, provide an interesting cut across the changing feminist vision that Sahgal had across a time span of almost three decades. The protagonist in the first book, *A Time to Be Happy*, is protesting psychologically to herself; this woman in *This Time of Morning*, however, is trying to carve out a niche in the world, ready to go into resistance mode in her style and her way; and the style of protest of the women in *Rich Like Us* is a blatant feminist defiance in broad day. The given paper performs an analogical review of these readings to examine the way in which the work of Sahgal is making the shift between depicting the censored resistance and the promotion of active feminist agency (Desai, 2004; Ghosh, 2008).

The paper contextualizes the literary contributions of Sahgal along with the existing feminist theory by looking at the existential feminism of Simone de Beauvoir (1949), the theory of subaltern resistance of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988) and intersectionality of Kimberle Crenshaw (1991). Placing her work in the framework of these theoretical paradigms, the research hopes to prove that the Sahgal novels are not merely illuminative in their narrative, they are a significant part of the feminist dialogue. She managed to capture the complexity of involving the Indian womanhood and promote change by employing some subtle and radical tactics, which made her an essential figure within the domain of feminist literature.

2. Protest and Introspection in *A Time to Be Happy* (1958)

The very first novel of Nayantara Sahgal *A Time to Be Happy* (1958) presents the first appearance of female protest in her playwork, in a silent contemplative form of resistance. The main character is a prisoner of conformity of a conventional marriage; she is an embodiment of the inner struggles that a number of Indian women faced during the times of early post-independence. Instead of the open rebellion, the resistance of the protagonist is of the psychological nature and characterized by her internal doubts, questions, and the consideration of the seclusion (Gupta, 2012). This protest is not an outburst, but a process that takes place, within the inner world of the protagonist, with slow paces and a gradual building, as an example of how feminist opposition can sometimes start as a protest in the mind before it can be transformed into social behavior.

Domestic space in the novel is placed as the place of oppression and a possible chamber of change. Conventionally perceived as a patriarchal stronghold that supports gender identity, the house in *A Time to Be Happy* turns out to be the paradoxical place introducing germination of feministically-minded consciousness. Sahgal brilliantly describes how constrained the existence of women was at the domestic level, but on the other hand introduces the domestic existence as the one where a sense of self-consciousness of women is rooted (Ghosh, 2008). In inner rosaries and pondering of thoughts, Sahgal exposes the reader to emotional work and unfulfilled dreams of women who conform on the outside and rebel internally. Such a stranglehold is what places the domestic realm as an ideological battleground as opposed to a neutral backdrop.

As the novel fits well with the theory of resistance by Gayatri Spivak (1988) that bears on the significant thought that the voices of marginality tend to protest by using modes whose invisibility or unintelligibility is not apparent in the power orders. Such a silent opposition is reflected in the minor measures of the protagonist: emotional detachment, intellectual contradictions and personal soul-searching. Whilst such behaviors may not be called protest, this is nonetheless a major break of patriarchal hegemony, especially when put in the perspective of the postcolonial feminist theory. Even silence is subversive in the story by Sahgal.

At the same time emphasis on the protagonist inner struggles appeals to the existential feminism of Simone de Beauvoir (1949) where she states that women should actively create themselves rather than live in the roles

that are defined upon them by the society. In *A Time to Be Happy*, the main heroine starts to suspect her personal contribution in maintaining the traditional norms. This is an essential process of questioning, of not putting up with roles played on us without asking questions, an event in feminine deliverance. As the depiction by Sahgal indicates, self-examination is not the withdrawal of the active process, but rather the vital definition phase of the own uprising ahead. A nascent self-consciousness experienced by the protagonist can be symbolic of the search of authenticity and autonomy as a point in existential feminism tradition.

Essentially, protest is presented in this novel by Sahgal not as a dramatic event but as a gradual psychological process. This transformation of obedience to inquisition by the protagonist is a pillar in Indian feminist writing where the author wants to show the emotional and intellectual aspects of rebellion. Staging the story around a self-examining female mind, Sahgal reiterates that feminist struggle does not have to be vociferous and rebellious to have some significance. Instead, the novel claims that mental strength and disobedience can break the rules and create the hope of larger feminist change- the foundation of the more vocal protestations that her later writing will feature (Mukherjee, 2009; Desai, 2004).

3. Assertiveness and Social Defiance in *This Time of Morning* (1965)

Nayantara Sahgal makes a thematic bridge in *This Time of Morning* (1965) to a very different approach to women: more sanguine expression of determination. The main character, Rashmi, is an embodiment of the new kind of urban Indian woman of the 1960s, an educated woman, an ambitious woman, who was proving more and more reluctant to accept the traditional female role. Her personality reproduces the changing cultural environment in India when women wanted to see themselves in the social arena and work spheres. Tracing the personal decisions of Rashmi, her critical discussion and relationship issues, Sahgal discusses the hardships of women striving to be more than a mere part of the patriarchal society (Kumar, 2013; Rajan, 2015).

Rashmi is able to make her independence claim publicly through her career ambitions and the refusal to address latterly socially mandated marriage values which in turn is not an act of silent rebel but vocal one. The rejection of her being carried in the predetermined direction reverberates with the post-existential appeal by Simone de Beauvoir (1949) who enjoys the unswerving desire of women to move beyond imposed expectations and to define their own existence. Sahgal places Rashmi in a quickly modernising city environment, in which conventional and liberal ideologies come to conflict. This juxtaposition of environments gives rise to this fertile feminist exposition, since Rashmi represents the minuses and the challenges of a generation that is trying to find themselves through social norms (Sinha, 2017).

The novel considers the theory of intersectionality developed by Kimberle Crenshaw (1991) not only focusing on the gender aspect but also placing the experiences of Rashmi at the junction of the class, education, and generational transformation. The fact that Rashmi can express her desires and can even dispute the rule of patriarchy is partially the result of her being educated and urban. The intersection of these aspects, either arming or disarming women in their resistance, is illuminated by Sahgal, and *This Time of Morning* is a crucial text in the context of explaining the stratification of feminist protest within the postcolonial India context. The rebellion of Rashmi is not an individual incident as far as it reflects a broader social shift in which the female agency is starting to be acknowledged.

Moreover, narrative structure developed by Sahgal focuses on direct speech, vivid characterization, and plot pacing that can be explained by the necessity of urgent resistance of Rashmi. The drama and passionate scenes of the novel highlight the psychological and social taxonomy of female independence in a traditional atmosphere. Sahgal attempts to depict the opposition against Rashmi by the male and the female character which illustrates the internalization of patriarchal norms that are widespread. However, despite all these forces against her, Rashmi does not give up, and this is a major theme in feminist texts, the voice of a woman who will not keep silent (Desai, 2004; Mukherjee, 2009).

Finally, *This Time of Morning* represents the shift in the vision of Sahgal as a feminist. Through a protagonist who is the active participant and the shaker of the institutions of patriarchy, Sahgal beautifully catches the spirit of the time in 1960s India when time was afoot, norms were being tested and feminism was making a perceptible and healthy shift. The narrative of Rashmi reveals that protest does not have to be as radical as it can even be the expression of lifestyle and imposing the choice with the repressive order of things a strong variant of protest. In that way, the novel makes a great contribution to feminist literature as it manages to

bridge the gap between internal rebellion and social action and place it in a bigger socio-political context (Gupta, 2012; Rajan, 2015).

4. Political and Personal Rebellion in *Rich Like Us* (1985)

Rich Like Us (1985) by Nayantara Sahgal is a high point in her feminist writing career exploring as it does a dynamic combination of both political protest and an individual revolt. The novel, which is set during the Emergency in India (1975-77), when state machinery was guided by severe repression and the stifling of civil liberties, examines, through this climate of explosiveness, the oppression of women both politically and at the domestic front. The main heroine, Simrit, turns out to be a full-fledged feminist character who is not only against the oppressive system of her marriage, but she also criticised the political machinations of the state as the miniature of patriarchal domination (Mukherjee, 2009). Her rebellion is not hidden and metaphorical anymore; it is open, eloquent, and radical, so this novel serves as the landmark of the Indian feminist novel.

The theme of women autonomy and self-definition is brought to the foreground with Simrit rebelling against her tyrant and refusing to be an unspeaking victim of emotional abuse. Simrit questions the authority of marriage and takes into court that proves her identity as a unique person fighting against the customary image of submissiveness of women. Such radical measure corresponds to the existential feminism suggested by Simone de Beauvoir (1949) who insisted that women need to resist their socially imposed roles and rediscover their power by making actively liberating decisions. The path to Simrit's selfhood is not presented as a passive process but an active process of working through the system of control and therefore a perfect example of what Beauvoir thinks real female freedom should turn out to be.

Existing outside the domestic arena, there exists a highly critical political critique as *Rich Like Us*, where the personal struggles of Simrit get contributed to the authoritarianism perpetrated by the state. The patterns of patriarchal rule or the use of surveillance, suppression and propaganda, in the novel brings forth the reign of the Emergency. Through this analogy, Sahgal tries to demonstrate that state and family formation are two situations that seem to share related concepts of domination and submission. By using the character of Simrit, Sahgal develops the feminist idea that the personal is political and therefore the personal resistance of the protagonist becomes the symbol of a greater struggle (Gupta, 2012). The novel therefore goes further to promote the thought that patriarchy demolition lies not only in the challenge to personal power relationships but also to institutionalized injustice.

One of the peculiarities of the character in Simrit is the ability to realize that in her opposition, there are gender boundaries coalescing with those of class that give richness to her rebellion. Being a relatively privileged woman, Simrit knows the importance of mediating freedom and justice through socio-economic status. The relationships between herself and the other women have different social backgrounds, such as domestic workers, political prisoners, and rural migrants—though basically a theory about how different systems of oppression play out in an individual, Kimberle Crenshaw (1991) speaks of intersectionality, which suggests the intersection of systems of oppression. Her growing sympathy with oppressed women serves as evidence of the fact that Simrit has moved above the method of personal liberation to the sphere of group feminist self-awareness, giving to her insurgence a touch of communalism and social self-examination.

Finally, you have a strong statement by *Rich Like Us* concerning feminist resistance in the face of a national emergency. His novel treats Simrit not only as the liberation of individual self as the flight against the domestic dictatorship but also his involvement in the political reality, law system, and feminism morals. This sense of urgency concerning an immediate action in favor of feminism strengthens Sahgal in her confrontational style of narrative filled with irony, satire, or criticism. The novel, according to Desai (2004) and Rajan (2015), is an intervention as well as a historical statement that allows seeing how the protest of women can stimulate change in their own circle and in the broader society. Placing personal agency in the context of political consciousness, *Rich Like Us* proves to be an eloquent tribute to the formidable strength of feminist writing, as it allows questioning existing categories and shaping a new imagery of social understanding.

5. Comparative and Thematic Analysis

Coming back in time with *A Time to Be Happy* (1958), *This Time of Morning* (1965), and *Rich Like Us* (1985): a comparative reading shows conscious and dynamic transformation of feminist protest in the approach chosen by Nayantara Sahgal. In *A Time to Be Happy*, the resistance of the main character is never

politically explicit and controlled only by inner meditation and stress of the mind in relation to marriage and domestic life. Relatively speaking, we have in *This Time of Morning* women who start to say out loud that they are unhappy and ready to fight the social standards. Lastly, there is full-grown feminist consciousness in *Rich Like Us* wherein protest is definitely not merely a personalization, but it is outright political. This progression of the literature, an internal angst to a disobedient demand, is an analog to the larger feminist changes in the Indian society at large and how much louder and more chaotic the voices of the woman have become over decades (Gupta, 2012; Mukherjee, 2009).

Both of the novels are grounded in a specific socio-historical situation, which has a significant impact on the shape and shine of female resistance. *A Time to Be Happy* is created at the time when the Indian society after the independence was still conservative and direct women rebellions were severely avoided in the social life; that is why Sahgal concentrates on the conflict within, which could be the most effective way to protest. In *This Time of Morning*, urbanization and changing gender norms of the 1960s serves as a good background over which women like Rashmi can stake their agency in a more explicit way. As we read *Rich Like Us*, the Emergency period when it is set is a very political time, creating the opportunity for Sahgal to emplot personal rebellion in broader story of political dissent. Such a development demonstrates the evolution of the protest of women to external factors, which, along with feminist arguments in favor of the mutual dependence between individual acts and structural forces, proves the interaction of these two levels (Rajan, 2015; Crenshaw, 1991).

The personal awareness and strength of Sahgal develop stronger as well in her main characters. Although the hero in *A Time to Be Happy* goes through a struggle with resistance that is inner conflict as well as a lack of emotional connectedness with life, Rashmi in *This Time of Morning* is quite self-assured in her feelings of independence and self-control. The last stage of this development, which cannot be considered as having been entirely successful, is symbolized in *Rich Like Us* by Simrit, an empowered woman who does not merely oppose the patriarchal power in her marriage but takes an active part in criticizing state oppression. This transition between the passive world of the victim and the subjective action of empowerment can be considered one of the key themes in feminist writing and the ideological development of Sahgal who grew older as her feminist vision matured (Sinha, 2017; Desai, 2004).

As far as themes are concerned, Sahgal continues to develop and reconfigure the themes of identity, autonomy, resistance, however, each novel redefines, remaps them, adapting them to the historical and cultural context. She is quite flexible and a skillful writer in the using of narrative strategies, as can be seen in her introspective monologue in *A Time to Be Happy*, dialog study and political allegory in *Rich Like Us*. The growing complexity of the story Sahgal also demonstrates that this author belongs to the feminist movement in literature as far as she unites the psychological and political aspects. The development of her characters between inner struggle and outward action shows the same feminist message that the personal is political, and ensures that resistance to social complicity must take place within first and be externalized later in order to bring larger change (Ghosh, 2008; Beauvoir, 1949).

Finally, the collection of works by Sahgal is valuable to the feminist argument of literature not only through the documentation of the struggle of women but also through the methodology of examination in the way that it advances and redefines resistance itself. Among the themes in her novels is that female protest is not unitary but a series of emotional, intellectual, and political resonance with the tag-patriarchal structures. Due to her emphasis on the versatility, strength, and richness of feminist consciousness, Sahgal moves her characters into various social and historical contexts. Therefore, her work is not only a literary record of the evolving feminist phenomenon in India but it can be deployed as a referential scheme to explain multiplicity of feminist voices and meanings (Gupta, 2012; Rajan, 2015).

Comparative Table: The Feminist Protest Development in Nayantara Sahgal Novels as Selected:

Aspect	A Time to Be Happy (1958)	This Time of Morning (1965)	Rich Like Us (1985)
Form of Protest	Internal, psychological introspection	Assertive, personal rebellion	Decisive, overt political and personal rebellion
Protagonist's Agency	Emerging self-awareness, silent resistance	Self-expressive, challenges gender roles	Fully autonomous, challenges both patriarchy and authoritarianism
Context of Protest	Domestic sphere, traditional family expectations	Urban India, modernization, feminist awakening	Emergency period India, socio-political unrest
Narrative Style	Introspective narration, internal dialogue	Dynamic interaction, external expression	Confrontational, political allegory
Theoretical Alignment	Subaltern resistance (Spivak), Existential feminism (Beauvoir)	Existential feminism, Intersectionality (Crenshaw)	Existential feminism, Intersectionality, Political feminism
Role of Setting	Post-independence conservatism	Urban socio-cultural transition	Political authoritarianism paralleling patriarchy
Intersectional Themes	Gender roles within class-based expectations	Gender, modernity vs tradition, class privilege	Gender and class oppression, legal and political awareness
Psychological Depth	High—focus on internal conflict and emotional labor	Balanced—psychological conflict with external assertion	High—integration of psychological, social, and political resistance
Impact of Protest	Subtle shift in self-perception, indirect challenge to norms	Direct challenge to social conventions, visible female autonomy	Public defiance with collective implications and transformation
Feminist Contribution	Establishes internal resistance as valid	Advances personal voice and urban feminist agency	Fully developed feminist critique with systemic focus

6. Conclusion

The literary career of Nayantara Sahgal is a strong account of an ever-changing manner that female protest manifests itself in Indian culture. The history of feminist consciousness found its way in her works, as the role of a woman, silently dwelling in the depths of her soul, it gradually turns into an outspoken dweller of resistant chaos. In *A Time to Be Happy*, rebellion is a quiet, internalized affair molded by heart conflict together with individual discontentment, constrained to the home-keeping circumference. This act of resistance at an early age is subtle but touching, and sets the scene to her later novels, in which feminist awakening shows itself with greater articulacy and aggression.

Even though it does not yet translate to the representational level, as Sahgal grows as a writer, she starts to present women who are no longer passive recipients of expectations and bring forth societal foundations on how to be females. In *This Time of Morning* the characters start to meet the issues of self-assertion in the same society that is gradually being opened up to modernity. Female main character of this novel demonstrates increased freedom to take personal action, challenge conventionality, and aim to be autonomous. Silence to speech, to emotional repression to intellectual pursuits is not an individual pursuit of certain characters, but an overall change that is going in the psyche of the post-independence Indian women.

When Sahgal later writes *Rich Like Us*, she is perceptive of feminist demonstration in bold and blunt terms that are politically oriented. The struggle of the main character is more than personal and becomes a part of the political discourse in the country, highlighting the fact that this is no longer childish politics, which only address the issue of patriarchal repression, but also the authoritarian nature of the state. Such path of continued protest through reflection to a political action helps highlight a highly detailed and multi-layered perception held by Sahgal regarding the close interrelationship between individual freedom and institutional transformation. It shows how individual decisions may affect and even crystallize dominant power structure in case these decisions are organized in accord with a bigger moral and ideological system.

In all her works, Sahgal convincingly manages to keep a balance between emotional richness and intellectual preciseness. She does not present idealized rebels, but real women who simply struggle to assume their place in the chess game of family, social and political life. Her narratives do not portray easy solutions to problems but rather give attention to the journey toward that end, voiced through questioning, opposing, growing and demanding. With fine characterization and a delicate enhancement of narrative, Sahgal analyzes the realization of independent identities by women by challenging their imposed roles.

Finally, the fiction of Sahgal actually confirms the idea that a literature can be also a transforming force. In her novels, the author requires the readers to learn to appreciate the varied varieties of female resistance and to appreciate them all whether internalized, assertive, or revolutionary. Not only her story tells about women and their life and hardship she also employs storytelling as a method of provoking thought and in order to encourage change. Her work is a testimony to the fact that fiction can be used to reflect, criticise and influence the attitudes towards society and she is one of the most significant feministic voices in Indian English literature.

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