

# NAYANTARA SEHGAL: FEMINISTIC CURRENTS IN STORM IN CHANDIGARH

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As compared to other literary approaches such as Formalism, Structuralism, psycho-analysis, Archetypal, Feminism is an overtly political approach. Feminism in general can be seen as collective and individual endeavour on the part of women at different times and in different countries to strive for equality of rights and opportunities in all walks of life. As a cultural ideology, women's movement may be traced back to the earliest phases of human history but more specifically it originated in the eighteenth century with the publication of Mary Wollstonecraft's essay "A Vindication of the Rights of Women" in 1792. In this essay, she presented revolutionary ideas on women's need for economic independence, political activism and personal freedom from injustice at the hands of men. It created an awareness among women about the bias against them in the domestic and social sphere of life. Virginia Woolf's essay "A Room of one's own" in 1929 vividly presented the unequal treatment given to women seeking education and alternatives to marriage and motherhood. French Feminist Simone de Beauvoir in her book, *The Second Sex* (1949) takes up the most fundamental question, 'What is a woman?' She claims that there is no such thing as feminine nature when she says: 'One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman'.

Nayantara Sahgal's novel *Storm in Chandigarh* presents a scathing protest against the denial of freedom and individuality to woman. Sahgal's concept of a free woman transcends the limits of economic or social freedom and becomes a mental or emotional attitude. The need for freedom for woman, according to her does not merely mean the defiance of old-established conventions; it must also make her aware of herself as an individual and refuse to tolerate injustice. Through her novel, she tries to put forward the view that in the modern society, woman should not be seen in the stereotypical passive roles of a sex object or as the one who is fit only to manage home chores and children without any self identify of her own. For the smooth functioning of family and the society at large, woman needs to be seen as man's equal and honoured partner. In her novel, Nayantara Sahgal, "pleads for the new marital morality based on mutual trust, consideration, generosity and absence of pretence, selfishness and self-centredness."

From the feminist perspective, Sahgal exposes the emptiness of man-woman relationships based on age-old pattern of gender inequality and injustice. She portrays self willed and individualistic women who are not only deeply aware of their emotional needs but also fervently strive for self fulfillment. These women show the courage of rejecting orthodox traditional social set up in favour of liberal and unconventional ways of life.

*Storm In Chandigah* is Mrs. Sahgal's third novel written after *A Time to be Happy* and *This Time of Morning*. It deals with complex human relationships in which love, friendship,

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honesty, freedom and equality play a vital role. The 'storm' in the lives of three married couples, Inder and Saroj, Jit and Mara and Vishal and Leela is portrayed against the political backdrop of 'storm' or confrontation between the newly divided states of the Punjab and Haryana over the issues of Chandigarh and, Bakhra Nangal territory etc. Gyan Singh, the ambitious Chief Minister of Punjab has announced a strike in the whole region for the selfish purpose of demonstrating his political strength. He is only concerned with his personal gains and does not even hesitate to use violence as a means for achieving his selfish ends. While Harpal Singh, the Chief Minister of Haryana acts as political counterfoil to Gyan Singh as he is a believer in the Gandhian ideology of non-violence. He has always given priority to the interests of people against his self interest. The Union Home Minister assigns the task of effecting a rapprochement between the two warring states to Vishal Dubey, an honest and promising central officer. Dubey goes to Chandigarh from Delhi to solve the political impasse but unwittingly involves himself in the private lives of the estranged husbands and wives especially those of Saroj and Inder.

Saroj, the female protagonist in the novel is married to Inder who runs the textile mills of Saroj's cousin Nikhil Ray's company in Chandigarh. There is no emotional communion between Saroj and Inder inspite of the fact that they have been married for the last four years and have two children. In the novel, Saroj emerges as a victim of male tyranny and chauvinism. She fears rather than loves her husband. She represents the new woman who is trying to retain her individuality and breathe freely in the suffocating atmosphere of passionless and emotionally unfulfilling marriages. "The New Woman is determined not merely to live, but to live in self respect, thus implicitly demanding a re-alignment of the parameters on which marriage function. Marriage without emotional involvement, sex without passion, love without respect are anathema to her as she manoeuvres her way through the changing times.

Saroj had a physical relationship with a person before her marriage but she does not consider it as a sin rather as a part of growing up. After her marriage she has been faithful to Inder to the fullest degree. She is a person who values mutual trust, consideration, honesty, communication and absence of pretence in a relationship. "Hailing from a liberal family, believing in openness and trust as the hallmark of relationships, Saroj had naively presumed that her husband shared those values, not realizing that he was the product of an atmosphere where male dominance is the most formidable Of cults." 4 She is thoroughly truthful to Inder and her honesty in marital relationship can be gauged from the fact that she even confesses about her pre-marital relationship to him with the intention of looking forward to a clean break from the past. But this confession actually dooms their marriage. Inder "was maddened by it. When it came over him he sat looking at Saroj with a revulsion that had ancient, tribal, male roots. ,5 (96). Inder represents the traditional patriarchal attitude of society toward woman which puts high premium on female chastity and virginity before marriage. While in the same patriarchal set up, the idea of male chastity in never thought about, let alone questioned. The double standards of patriarchal morality is visible from the fact that Inder who wants to make Saroj feel 'ashamed' of her pre-marital affair himself has many sexual experiences before marriage as the third person narrator tells, "he had been precocious and successful in sex, robustly collecting experience where he found it." (134). But women have no right to question male promiscuity or indulge in practices which are considered to be male prerogatives. This patriarchal attitude is aptly summed up by Dubey when he says, "The one

thing you could not crave, the thing that was a crime was that they should inhabit the world as your equals, with splendor and variety of human choice before them."(190). Men like Inder who are the products of conventional orthodox patriarchal society and whose consciousness is steeped in male chauvinism can never accept non-virgin women as wives. Inder felt deeply cheated as he recalls, "Somewhere he had read the were primitive societies that demanded the blood of virginity as there were evidence of female purity. No man need be cheated of that. He had been cheated."(96). Human civilization, irrespective of time and space has always demanded that a woman should be pure and virgin before marriage. In the ancient times, even the most virtuous woman like Sita had to go through the test of purity after she was abducted by Ravan, in order to return to the fold of marriage. In the nineteenth century, Angel Clare of Hardy's Tess of D'urbervilles who was deeply in love with Tess leaves her when he comes to know that her virginity was ravished by another man before their marriage. And in the post independent India, there has been no change in this age old trend. This shows that inspite of technological development, ideologically human race has progressed very little. Vishal Dubey, who emerges as the spokesperson of the novelist, rightly sums up patriarchal prejudice against woman when he says, "A woman was not entitled to a past, not entitled to human hunger, human passion or even human error. In the fires and desolations of living she ranked as not quite human."(190).

Inder instead of reaching out and valuing the precious human being in Saroj, has never been able to forget her pre-marital affair and neither let her forget it. He keeps on torturing her mentally and physically ever since her confession. But as every cloud has silver lining, modern society, inspite of its male dominated ideology, has men like Vishal Dubey who believe in gender equality and women's liberation His views on female chastity are like whiff of fresh air in suffocating patriarchal atmosphere as he says, "If chastity is so important and so well worth preserving... it would be easier to safeguard it by keeping men in seclusion, not women... The biological urge is supposed to be much stronger in men, so it is they who should be kept under restraint and not allowed to roam free to indulge their appetites. The entire east might flourish under this sort of reversal of purdah."(191).

Saroj symbolizes modern women who want to establish a new order with changed standards where they can be their true selves and where character is judged by the purity of heart and not chastity of body. "According to Sahgal, Saroj's premarital act of sex has nothing to do with the pollution of flesh, promiscuity or immorality. , 6 But Inder's attitude towards her has always been of disgust, contempt and revulsion. He always abuses her and sometimes even brutally beats her because of her this one act before marriage. On the other hand, inspite of all this torture and tormentation, Saroj has never let her inner strength, her pride and her self esteem get completely obliterated. "Even in extremity, she had never said, 'Forgive me'. For each time she had lived through a night's torment, she could wake to the sunlight and find herself unsullied in it."(94). Saroj tries her level best to adjust and compromise at every point with Inder because she feels that she is responsible for the failure of their marriage. She always remain vigilant not to do things which could annoy Inder and tries to talk on 'safe' topics which could not make him burst into anger. Because of such conscious living with Inder where there is no room for spontaneous behavior, she always feel tense and pressurized. Her mental burden is evident when she frankly tells Vishal, "Half the time one is afraid – you know – saying the wrong thing or of being misunderstood- just for being oneself and being punished for it. So one spends such a lot of time acting or at least hiding and that's

very tiring." (89).

There is no passionate bond, affection, emotional communication or understanding between Saroj and Inder. He treats her with total indifference and regards her only as a sex object. When he comes to know that Saroj is pregnant inspite of their already having two children, he felt irritated and rebukes her as if only she is responsible for her pregnancy. He puts the whole blame on her when he says, "Hundreds of women use the damned thing successfully its madness to have three children nowadays." (46).

After her pregnancy, when Saroj first feels the flutter inside her body, she is overjoyed and wants Inder to feel it move but for Inder "the touch without sexual significance, the caress of affection was different. It cost him an effort to make it." (175). While sex with her came to him without any effort and difficulty and it was a mere performance of act without any emotional involvement for him.

Saroj is a person who is fully involved in life. She wants to feel the every moment of her pregnancy. When she first feels the flutter insider her body, she wants to laugh and celebrate. She even tells Vishal that her flutter is nine inches long. For her, to have babies without being completely involved in the process is same as dogs and cats have their babies. According to her, by feeling the every step of the process, one is not troubled by the pain rather one feels dignified. Saroj is a woman who is interested only in living things around her. She is not at all bothered about the untidy things in her house, for example, she does not mind if sofas and chairs in her house need to be upholstered or if children's socks need darning. The things, which are not alive, are not important for her. On the other hand, she is very careful that her garden looks beautiful and orderly. She takes infinite pains with a stray animal and spends hours in the company of her children. But Inder is unable to reach to the deep core of her inner being. He feels irritated at her slip-shod house-keeping, at her careless way of dressing and at her wonder at every flutter in her body. He never thinks of her as a person with feelings and emotions and is therefore, unable to comprehend her need to be deeply involved in things happening around her. He is a businessman and thinks of his wife also in business like terms. For him, "A wife was one half of an enterprise, the compliant business partner who presided over house and children and furthered her husband's career. Saroj had not interest in any of it and not because she was gifted with any accomplishment that took her time.

It was her pre-occupation with herself that unnerved him. That and curious concentration of her spirit upon whatever came her way." (53). This makes evident that Inder allows no individuality and freedom to Saroj. Inder in this sense behaves like a typical representative of patriarchal society in which, as Julia Kristeva points out, woman is always marginalized by the male symbolic order. He wants to control all her actions and wants her thoughts to be in agreement with him. When Saroj finds a good friend in the form of Vishal Dubey and frequently goes for walk with him, Inder gets deeply infuriated. He snubs her for being absent from home. Sarofs utterance- "I like to talk to him. He is a good man"- inflames Inder and he blunts, "I don't give a damn if he is Jesus Christ."(193). So saying he thrashes her not only with words but also with blows. "This attitude of Inder, it will be agreed, is typical of Indian men, who regard their wives to be possessions, meant to be used for furthering their careers and looking after their homes and children. That this is the approved norm is proved by the wife's passive acceptance of the whole situation. ,7 Saroj's martial relationship with

Inder is completely contrary to her image of ideal marriage where "it would recognize that somewhere within the desirable woman, behind the eyes, the mouth, the breasts, there was a -struggling, imperfect human being to be valued for her own sake."(192).

Saroj's yearning for acceptance, communication, honesty, liberty and lack of pretence in a relationship draws her near Vishal Dubey who completely shares her emotional cravings. He like Saroj is also a victim of marital unhappiness. His wife, Leela who dies six years back due to the surgery of an incompetent abortionist, has never been able to reach the inner core of his personality. She marries Dubey because he is a successful civil servant with promising future. The mismatch between the two is evident from the fact that Leela was used to the life of social parties, hypocrisy, adultery and pretence while Vishal wanted a person with whom one can "talk to when the day's work was done, the friend with whom one could be naked in spirit and to whom one could give the whole of oneself."(69). His loveless and faithless wife is not able to fulfill his need for companionship and understanding. Vishal and Saroj's common ideas about marital relationship which according to them should be based on emotional communication, honesty, complete acceptance of other person's weaknesses and lack of pretence and their lack of realization of such relationship with their respective spouses bring them close to each other.

Vishal Dubey is a feminist in the real sense of the term. As Toril Moi says in his essay, 'Feminist Literary Criticism' that men can be feminists and, it is the sole prerogative of woman to be a feminist. Most of Dubey's ideas in the novel shows his deep concern about the lot of women in present times. "He thought of his own country women as the subdued sex, creatures not yet emerged from the chrysalis, for whom the adventure of self-expression had not even begun... there had long been a figure of humility, neck bent, eyes downcast, living flesh consigned to oblivion... Their sphere was sexual and their job procreation." (189). He wants people to think that the world consists of human beings rather than men and women in watertight compartments. He has always treated his wife as his equal and has wanted her to give him her natural self but unfortunately she always maintained her fiction and proves to be an adulterous lady. With Saroj also, he wants to have a relationship in which there is no pretence but frank communication. He loves Saroj not because she is a woman in the physical sense of the term but because he likes the beautiful human being in her.

Mara is childless and runs a school for small children to fill her emotional lack. In the initial period of their affair, both Inder and Mara experience fulfillment and happiness. For the first time, Inder realizes that love does not just mean sex rather it means involvement. His misconception of Saroj being impure, has never let him experience a sense of emotional involvement with her while making love to her but his brief affair with Mara fills him with new revelation about love. He tells Mara, "Do you know the strangest thing about you, Tamara? Talking to you and kissing you are all the same. It all blends. I don't know where one leaves off and the other begins... Suddenly all the difference between loving and not loving had become apparent to him." (173). On the other hand, Mara inspite of having loving and considerate husband in the being of Jit, gets drifted towards Inder because she wanted, best of both the worlds- 'the hardness of Inder and softness of Jit. But Mara who has been brought up in the comparatively free environment of Europe has fully developed individuality of her own She cannot tolerate that woman should be regarded as an object of

possession. When Inder says about his wife, "She belong to me." Mara quips, "Belongs to you? So do your shoes." (138). Which means that it is not 'belonging' but understanding that she expects from her man. Time and again, Mara shows that she is a woman of independent self. On one of the occasion when Inder shows his disgust at woman talking and behaving like men, Mara immediately asserts that it may be because that they have started behaving more like human beings and less like possessions.' Their relationship comes to an end when the understanding dawns on Mara that there is some part of Inder which she could never fully know inspite of her best efforts.

In the end Inder is left alone as Saroj decides to go to Delhi for her confinement and with the view of spending rest of her life with Vishal. Inder himself is responsible for his loneliness because it is his own inflexible and indomitable self which prevented him from establishing an enduring relationship with Saroj or Mara. It is not as though Saroj wants to throw her life with Inder away and walk out. On the other hand she makes every effort on her part to make his marriage with Inder successful. The following quote makes clear her feelings for him. "A yearning to reach Inder possessed her, stirring a desire she recognized as old and unfulfilled. She wanted to love him in unpermitted ways, to make love to his doubts and dreams, to the private worlds within him that were locked and barred from her."(200). But all her efforts to go near him remain as useless as of a bird beating against the window pane to go inside. She wants to be a good wife but not at the cost of her individuality. She longs for 'oxygen of understanding' with Inder which she actually finds in her friendship with Vishal. Her friendship with Vishal makes her realize the hidden potentialities of her self. She realizes that she can no longer submit to the injustice of the dual morality anti double standard adopted by Inder. She learns that endurance is no virtue and human relationships cannot be left to chance. In the end she becomes symbolic of modern women who not only aspire for freedom, dignity and equality in a relationship but who actually has the courage to leave the rotting relationship in favour of one which is full of possibilities without caring about patriarchal society. Comparing Anita Desai and Nayantara Sahgal, K. Meera Bai writes "Anita Desai's women either succumb or survive the existential problems within the family fold whereas Nayantara Sahgal's women come out of the bond, if need be, to live as free individuals."

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