

Storm in Chandigarh: Critical Analysis of Gender Issues

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Abstract

The Indian feminist writers present before the world the neglected and humiliating role which a woman has to undertake in family and society. Amongst leading fiction writers of feminist stream Nayantara Sahgal shows her deep concern for the dichotomy of man-woman relationship. Nayantara Sahgal's central theme in Storm in Chandigarh is the concept of individual freedom. Therefore her heroines are portrayed as struggling for freedom and trying to assert their individuality in their own right.

Keywords: Liberation, Feminist

Political storm creates uproar after partition of Punjab into two states- Punjab and Haryana with Chandigarh as one capital and on the individual level it causes conflicts in the marital lives of three couples Inder and Saroj, Jit and Mara, and Vishal and Leela. The term 'Storm' in the novel *Storm in Chandigarh* expresses chaos, violence, on political as well as on personal levels. The two milieus personal and political are intricately woven in the fabric of her fictional framework. Her belief that the fate of the three patriarchal institutions, the family, the society and the state are interrelated is similar to that of Kate Millet. As Kate Millet in *Sexual Politics* says, "Co-operation between the family and the larger society is essential, else both would fall apart" ⁽¹⁾. The violence at the individual level or in the family is more depressing/grim when compared to the violence at political levels. The political issue

is indicative of “a socially pervasive violence of attitude that appears more seductively in marriages.”⁽²⁾ Says Robert Lomas in *A Review of Nayantara Sahgal’s Storm in Chandigarh*.

The development of an individual is not possible without freedom. Sahgal’s insight/perception of freedom does not mean mental freedom but freedom of the whole personality i.e. discovering of one’s true identity. While discussing her technique Nayantara Sahgal in *Passion for India* says,

In a sense writers write about the same thing all their lives though they may hang theme on different frameworks. My ongoing theme would probably be freedom⁽³⁾

Storm in Chandigarh explores the theme of freedom especially on the side of woman where they have liberty to live according to their own desires, not pressed under male hegemony. This novel focuses on Saroj’s unhappy experience within married life. Saroj feels smothered in her marriage because she lacks friendship, tenderness and frankness. She is nurtured in an unrestrained ambiance. She hunts for the reciprocal and mutual participation in her relationship but her efforts in search for involvements are futile. She expects equality and faith in her relationship. Not only the culture of Inder is dissimilar with that of Saroj but their ideas related to marital life are also poles apart. She belongs to the ‘sphere of intense, sharpened sensibility’(SC181) whereas Inder on the other hand is an insensitive person ‘a confident muscular grace radiating energy’(SC39) and he fits in the category of ‘he man school’(SC144), a characteristic/archetypal male chauvinist. He believes in male supremacy where there are no issues of liberty and articulacy for women. Vishal Dubey, a civil servant thinks that when two persons from different background, disposition and outlook get in wedlock estrangements are likely to occur. He astutely examines:

...that can only happen in a country like this which produces people of such vastly different traditions and a thin veneer of westernization succeeds in fooling people they come from the same sort of past. Get two people so unlike together in marriage and every effort at growth on the part of one can look like an act of betrayal to the other. (SC166)

Saroj in an innocent manner confesses to Inder on one occasion that “She just out of college, the ink hardly dry on her fingers, history and literature fresh on her tongue” (SC 86) and “enchantingly innocent” (SC 86) admits that she had indulged in pre-marital sex during her college days. As she reveals the fact, it activates Inder’s aggressiveness and jealousy because for him marriage does not mean involvement or self-expression of women/wife but just

adherence to traditions. He considers himself to be master and thinks that his wife should follow him. T.Ashoka Rani in *Critical studies on Indian Fiction in English* tersely comments:

In spite of four years of married life with two children, there is no harmony in her marriage. Believing honesty and sincerity as the foundation for any marriage Saroj confesses to Inder about her premarital affair. He views it as serious moral lapse and nags her. She feels she is responsible for the friction in marriage and tries to do everything in her capacity to save the marriage.⁽⁴⁾

Here, we remember Thomas Hardy's *Tess of d'Urbervilles* where Tess has to suffer for her loss of chastity. Inder tortures Saroj frequently for this. She is astonished /shocked by sadistic approach of Inder to this affair. Inder is obsessed and could not absolve this act of Saroj and constantly pinches her for her disgraceful deed. He considers it as a serious moral lapse. Patriarchal society would consider this act of Saroj as serious offence but she is not really guilty because her stand is that her act was a part of growing up "the abandonment of the very young"(SC 177). In her idea in spirit she is virtuous if not in flesh. On Saroj's part, her past never impinges on present because she was not involved in the act emotionally and it was just a physical act. She has forgotten her experience as it has not left any stamp on her and she says, "I am clean and whole and yours" (SC 85) She keeps on saying "I don't want forgiveness. I have committed no crime." (SC 85) B.P.Sinha in the article *Feminist Concept of Freedom in the Novels of Nayantara Sahgal* says:

Saroj however, is not guilty and dishonest. It is already behind her a relationship which has not involved her deeply enough. It is different that society which lives by double standard brands her as guilty. For herself she is fully involved but Inder does not understand her and tries to destroy her innocence. He persists in taking up the past and withdraws into his own self, leaving her outside isolated and unhappy.⁽⁵⁾

Inder judges his wife on the strict parameters of orthodox traditions and never lets Saroj forget her past. He considers himself to be deceived:

"There were people he knew who would have flung her out with the rubbish, considered her used, soiled and unfit for marriage. Somewhere he had read there were primitive societies that demanded the blood of virginity as evidence of female purity.....He had been cheated."(SC 86)

T.S.Anand in his article *The Flight From the Virtuous Stereotype: A Study of Storm in Chandigarh* scrutinizes the character of Inder as:

Inder loves her, not as a person but as a possession, thus undermining the genuine basis of conjugal bliss that flows from I-Thou relationship. His attitude sounds anachronistic in the setting of the novel because, in spite of his westernization, Inder turns out to be a prisoner of an outdated male cult which clearly demarcates the roles of men and women. ⁽⁶⁾

Inder has just got an excuse to assault and humiliate her. It looks as if just due to male superiority he is punching her because on his part he is also indulged in relationship with Mara. But he keeps on scratching the past of Saroj. The conversation reflects the grimness of the situation:

“And then’ these must have been others.

There were not others.

No other who went that far? But there must have been others.

There were not, she turned to him widely, it’s finished. What do you want me to do about it now? What do you want?

You should be ashamed of what you did. Aren’t you?”(SC 85)

Though the condition of Saroj is wretched but to preserve her marriage she yields for a time being to “ancient, tribal, male roots” (SC 86) Saroj is deeply involved in her marriage and is loyal to Inder but he fails to sustain true participation with Saroj because he is a person brought up in a patriarchal culture where losing of female virginity before marriage is deemed as an act of immorality. N.Rama Devi in her article *From Apathy to Liberation: A Study of Nayantara Sahgal’s Storm in Chandigarh* analyses the character of Saroj as:

Saroj is like Harpal in her passive acceptance, in her changing to moments of response and communication just to save her marriage and in her adopting of withdrawal tactics. Both Saroj and Harpal are representatives of that majority of the people who are instrumental in letting violence spread and engulf them and the society at the personal and societal levels just because of their apathy-which quality, unfortunately they tend to equate with ‘tolerance’ the noble quality preached by Mahatma Gandhi. ⁽⁷⁾

Chastity is used as weapon by Inder to hurt Saroj. Saroj had lost his virginity long before marriage and due to this reason she has to suffer the assaults of Inder “the secret disgrace, sickened into silence and turned to stone”(SC 86) but ironical thing in the matter is that Inder himself had lost his virginity long before marriage. The narrator informs:

“There had been no such nightmare to contend with until his marriage. He has been precocious and successful in sex, robustly collecting experience where he found it. Saroj had plundered that robustness, made a tortured image of the body’s surrender, and nailed him to the inquisitor’s chair (SC 121)

Saroj has to pay the penalty of being regarded as sinner for revelation of her pre marital affairs. “right to radiance the day she had told him of her first experience and been branded sinner” (SC85) Men take pride in having relation before and after marriage but they do not accept this from women’s side. Inder continuously indulged in premarital affairs but he continuously scolds/rebukes Saroj for her act of immorality. This incident illustrates the malicious face of patriarchal social order where dual principles work out notably.

“When Inder could not sleep he resurrected the other man, the man who has known Saroj before he had ,making her marriage a mockery and betrayal. He had stalked the man down the dark alleys of his imagination his thoughts about him, churning, now sticking, now moving sluggishly, now flouting on unimpeded like the filth in the city sewers. If I catch him I shall kill him.”(SC 83)

It is regarded as an inexcusable crime for an unmarried girl to have sexual relation with any man but the weird thing in the patriarchal society is that it is not considered as a crime for a man to have sexual intercourse before or after marriage. The patriarchal society is very sensitive about sex or pre-marital sex or categorically and more correct to say is sensitive to only female sexuality, stripping the purity of male pre-marital or extra-marital sexual status. Due to that this one act marital life of Saroj is sullied. A.S. Altekar in his book *The Position of Woman in Hindu Civilization* says:

Generally speaking in all climes and times men have laid down a much higher standard of sexual morality for women than what they were themselves prepared to accept. Hindu society has been no exception to this rule. ⁽⁸⁾

No doubt Inder cares for Saroj but he cares for her as if she was a slave. Inder cannot excuse her nor let her forget it. So this past enlarges the gap in their relation.

A husband and a wife together in a family are like two sides of a coin. This relationship should be balanced one otherwise one has to be prepared for the worst. Both should understand each other; respect each other, then only a happy family could be imagined. Mahipal Kajlan aptly summarizes everything in these two lines, “Man without a woman had been a brute and a woman without a man, only an emotional and incomplete entity” ⁽⁹⁾

Inder is an insensitive person who never cares for the feelings of his wife. He regards his wife as possession not as an individual. Saroj lacks true companionship and involvement in her marriage. Jasbir Jain in her book *Nayantara Sahgal* remarks that Saroj “wants to be recognized as an individual and wants to build up relationship on that basis whereas Inder treats her merely as a wife-a possession not a person.”⁽¹⁰⁾

A significant aspect of Sahgal’s philosophy is mother child relationship, which is an unbreakable bond. Saroj very enthusiastically waits for her third child. She is completely occupied with the child and is happy to have it in her womb. The unborn child is essential part of her being and she is totally involved with it. When Sahgal’s women break away from their husbands it is not to be misinterpreted that they do not care for children. Sahgal regards children as extremely important part of a woman’s identity.

Thus we can conclude that Sahgal’s women reveal a strange ambivalence; they are ostensibly more liberated, self assertive and tougher character types as compared to women in the texts of other writers and yet paradoxically they have a sense of reverence for male superiority and recognition of male dominance. The novel weaves a beautiful, realistic and convincing fabric of man-woman relationship in a subtle manner. The novelist highlights the significance of a man’s influence on a woman’s life and the vice-versa. This influence conditions the working of the person’s psyche.

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