

From Fear Set Free: A Brief Study of the Intricacies of Love, Marriage and Man-Woman Relationship

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Abstract:

In Nayantara Sahgal's writings, the theme of politics holds a central place and it stands true for her autobiographies as well namely—*Prison and Chocolate Cake* (1954) and *From Fear Set Free* (1962). In the former, she depicts one of the crucial periods in the history of India, a time when India was combating against the evil British forces to set itself free from the shackles of slavery, and thus, the narrative of the book unfolds many themes such as Indian freedom struggle, Gandhian whirlwind, the fight against the British, the role of Indian National Congress, Bapu's assassination to mention a few. In the sequel to this book *From Fear Set Free*, she presents some more aspects of pre-independent India—that was still under the British rule—and how under the leadership of Gandhiji, the whole Nation attained its freedom but with Independence came the most horrific happening of its kind—the partition of India and Pakistan. So, it is obvious that the book revolves around the themes of India's Independence, the partition and its menacing effects, and the struggle of a nation that was yet to stand on its feet after independence. Therefore, it can be said that in both of her books, she deals with the themes of Indian politics but a closer reading of the text reveals many other things that are more of a personal nature rather than national. She mingles the personal and the national elements in both of her books in such a way that the national aspects gets highlighted but some of the personal things are also worth dealing with and it is the very theme in her second book of life-writing that the present researcher aims to explore. This research paper deals with the intricacies of love, marriage, and man-woman relationship in *From Fear Set Free*.

Key Words: Love: Romantic v/s Universal, Marriage, Man-woman relationship, Indianness, The Question of Choice, Ideological Difference, Positivism.

Full Paper:

An acclaimed Indo-Anglian writer of the twentieth century, Nayantara Sahgal is known both as a literary writer as well as a political columnist. She bears the distinction of being the only political novelist of the Indo-Anglian literary scene. Her novels revolve around the theme of political consciousness and responses of the characters to the crisis engendered by political changes. However, her fame as a writer does not rely solely on such classical novels as *A Time to be Happy* (1958), *Storm in Chandigarh* (1965) and *Rich Like Us* (1985) but also on such works of life-writing as *Prison and Chocolate Cake* (1954) and *From Fear Set Free* (1962). Since politics is in her blood, no wonder that her writings whether fictional or non-fictional carry the tinge of politics all through. In addition to this, her writings are also known to include the mingling of “national” and “personal,” which is why, her work can also be read for its historic value. A. V. Krishna Rao rightly comments: “Sahgal's autobiographical narrative at times reads like a delectable piece of historic fiction rather than a chronologically correct personal calendar of events” (100). *From Fear Set Free* too delineates the pre-and-post-independence picture of

India and deals with the themes of Indian freedom struggle, the attainment of *Swaraj* under the leadership of Gandhiji, the partition and its catastrophic effects and the making of a new and free India. Thus, the text foregrounds the national and historical aspect in her autobiography. However, it can be argued that a close reading of the text reveals other issues that are of great value as well. In this book, Sahgal portrays another segment of her life—the first one being narrated in *Prison and Chocolate Cake*. The text provides one an opportunity to explore and examine the personal life of writer that, in turn, gives a chance to deal with the theme of love, marriage and man-woman relationship in *From Fear Set Free*

In her book, Sahgal narrates various experiences of her life that makes her narrative of self quite interesting. Ritu Menon says, “One writes from one’s own experience of life, the richer the experience the better the writing” (15). It stands true for Sahgal who while depicting the journey of her *self* in *From Fear Set Free* provides rich insights on the concept of love, marriage and man-woman relationship. When Taru, as Sahgal is lovingly called by her loved ones, returns to the independent and partition-torn India, her best friend Max’s words about love keep reverberating in her mind. Though she makes it clear that her friend was referring to the romantic notion of love—flowers, gifts and music in the air, kind of—which he finds necessary to sustain the relationship of a man and a woman. Sahgal wonders that all her life she has experienced a universal aspect of love that was exemplified by Mahatma Gandhiji. His power of love—that was his lodestar during the times of Indian freedom struggle—was capable of making friends out of enemies. Her deliberation on the dual aspects of love clearly hints at the significance of love in her life. No wonder, the book begins on the note of love.

The opening chapter of the book presents two shades of love: the romantic love as expressed by Max and the universal feeling of love as experienced by Taru. It is the former one which awaits her. During one of her visits to Connaught Place, she encounters a Sikh man who forcibly makes predictions about her future and tells her that although two men compete for her affection, she would marry neither of them; instead she would marry a very rich person having a lot of money. This harmless prediction makes her think what sort of partner she wants in life. She writes: “I had every intention of marrying a history professor and spending my life doing research into some remote period of Indian history. Books would line the walls of our house from floor to ceiling and a devotion to the past would unite us in the face of all the bewildering changes of modern times” (FFSF 24). This is how she envisages her future life but quite often is the case that life has a different plan for each one of us and this is what happens with Taru.

She informs that because of the troubling event of partition, she gets to meet a young man named Gautam who was employed in a British firm. Their mutual liking gradually turns into a serious relationship that would culminate into marriage but the passage to marital bliss was not easy for her as she was aware of the different worlds they both belonged to. From the very beginning, it was clear to her that Gautam was “an Indian whose world had been as different from mine as any man I could have met, whose home in Lahore had had the best of linen, glass and wine that his father’s frequent trips to Europe could provide, in contrast to mine, which in support of the Swadeshi Movement used only Indian made goods. What was more, this was an Indian to whom Gandhi was just a name, and freedom for his country an event that had deprived him of his home and a part of his inheritance” (FFSF 34-35).

These differences of ideology and lifestyle start to worry her too much. At one point in the text she says that her life, as she imagined with Gautam, appeared to be a rockgarden full of unaccountable small crevices and obstructions. The question that worries her the most is that how she will be able to enter into his world or he into hers. Further she states that Gautam seemed unperturbed regarding their life and did not find these differences problematic because he believed that instead of worrying about their different worlds, they should focus on the new world that they can build together. This is how he expects their future to be, and therefore, he starts concentrating on the particular issue of their marriage.

Sahgal in this book gives due consideration to the concept of marriage in India which is why it becomes necessary to bring forth all the varied ideas connected with this theme. First of all, she gives her mother's opinion on marriage. According to her mother, the future for a woman begins with marriage and children. She may be an accomplished person in her field and a conscientious citizen doing work but first there is marriage. Her mother says: "Girls were in any case only potential till they married. Marriage made them actual, brought them to full flower, drew out all the hidden best in them" (FFSF 19). On the contrary, according to her father, marriage is a very unnatural institution. It requires two people to live in comparative harmony which is one of the most difficult things in the world. But for him as well, life remains incomplete without marriage; so, one should do it in a proper time in order to have fulfillment out of it.

Further, she tells that in India, marriage takes place either by choice or arrangement, but it is something that must happen in due course of time. Since babyhood, both men and women are conditioned in such a way to accept this institution without any rebellion or showing any undue emotion at the mention of it. Next, she says that generally the concept of arranged marriage is favoured by many people because it is believed to be "a solid, stable structure, true and tried, built on the theory that affection and mutual regard could reasonably be expected to flourish between partners of the same social religious and provincial background. Another sort of relationship not based on any of these assumptions, might be successful to, but it was a risk, and a whole lifetime could not be treated as a gamble" (FFSF 51). She further says that marriage by choice is quite often considered as "embarking on a sea of differences with no anchor" (FFSF 52). In short, people find arranged marriages to be less risky and perilous in comparison to love marriages.

Besides, she says that marriage is considered more important for a woman than a man because it is generally agreed that a single woman can have no status in society. People follow the laws decreed by Manu who advocates that a woman belongs first under her father's protection and then her husband's and if, as ill fortune would have it, she becomes a widow, then, she must depend on her son. Sahgal is surprised to note that "Manu, to whose laws Hindu Society owes its astonishing continuity and stability despite the repeated conquests and invasions that have swept India, holds a venerable place in history" (FFSF 51). She wonders why cannot people turn their attention to the *vedic* concept of women in which both men and women shared equality, be it the matters related to home or the state. Her father also favours this concept of woman rather than Manu's concept of clinging vine and that of the much later ideals of the helpless and fragile woman. Therefore, it can be said that marriage holds a very important place in the life of a woman more than a man, and it is such an institution that no one can escape from

it, so, how can Taru evade it. She goes for the marriage by choice though she ponders over her decision a lot. She has her own reasons to reflect upon her choice as she writes:

For my elders marriage both by law and tradition had been indissoluble, a choice once made irrevocable. For my grandchildren, who would grow up in a greatly changed India, it would, in all probability, be a more flexible and less stable institution, yielding more and more to the pressures of personality and society. For me it would fall midway between the two, the law eventually facilitating divorce while tradition and sentiment were ranged against it. It would not be the impregnable institution it had once been. Where the responsibility for it rested with oneself one had to be all the more certain. (FFSF 47-48)

No doubt, she wants to be certain of her choice. She remembers her cousin Fory's advice that marriage is a serious and difficult thing; one has to work on it because it is going to change one's entire life, this is why, one has to be very sure about it. Besides her anxiety is not for herself or her personal happiness rather it is for the new life which she thinks to be a misfit for a person like her who has grown up in very different circumstances unlike her would-be-husband Gautam. She thinks that life after marriage will be very different unlike any other newly married woman. It will be strange from the smallest detail to the overall picture because as she reflects:

I should shift from a world where men wore Gandhi caps and Indian clothes made of hand-spun cloth to that of European suits and ties, from orange juice (than which nothing stranger had ever been served at Anand Bhawan) to the cocktail circuit, from an outlook that considered these things natural to one that was baffled by them, from the atmosphere of a political crusade to one of commerce. For the first time in my life I was to participate in a pattern of life bequeathed to us by nearly two hundred years of British contact and rule. (FFSF 81)

Sahgal in this work gives little information about her life after marriage. No doubt, she does mention many facts like motherhood, domestic problems that of housing or servants, her visits abroad as well as in India but she does not reveal in detail her relationship with her husband. Although the reading of her text clearly implies that she longed for "a world whose texture is kindly" (POV 30). B. Tirupathi rightly observes, "Sahgal ponders over life and its problem in *From Fear Set Free*, though not directly but expresses her feeling of suffocation and fear of being habituated to the monotony of married life" (200). Though, it is only in small conversations that she has with some of her family members or friends that provide us some facts related to her relationship with her husband. For instance, the disastrous meeting of Max and Gautam seems to reveal the life of Sahgal who is seen struggling to find a balance between two different worlds of love—one that Max envisions for her and the one that she is living with her husband. One more example comes to the mind; once dining with her Mamu, Nehru ji, she asked him an important question: what according to him is the most important quality for a successful marriage? After reflecting upon this question for a while, Nehruji tells her that it is difficult to say what is the most important quality, and he doubts whether or not there is any formula that exists for a successful marriage, or does this thing—a wholly successful marriage exist or not. But one thing that he is sure about is the advice that he gives Taru in the following words. He says that in any relationship "it is important never to hurt another deliberately. And it is

important always to leave the way open to talk. As long as two people can talk there is a way back to understanding, no matter how hard the breach between them. I've found this true all my life, both in private and in my work. It is true of people and nations (FFSF 237).

This brief conversation between Taru and her Mamu just gives a hint about Taru and Gautam's relationship and one can only guess that there might be something which she chooses not to reveal. But Nehruji's advice indeed guides her to work towards the relationship that one forms in life, She is also reminded of the fact that "choice in any sphere is a peril, and the basic division of people is of those who believe in choice and those who mistrust it" (FFSF 52). She chooses to be the former one and imbibe the same advice given to her by Nehruji. Meena Sodhi rightly observes, "*From Fear Set Free* does not blatantly condemn her marriage nor does it overtly express any feelings of suffocation and bondage, which Sahgal may have experienced during her married life. However what she often alludes to is feeling some kind of fear and being confined to a particular way of life" (146). In addition to this, Nehruji also teaches her indirectly that one needs to shed fear as well as anxiety for the betterment of the nation or, for that matter, relationships. What is required of an individual is that one must learn to concentrate on the one inescapable reality that is the daily work which has to be done, be it for a bright future of India or one's own world. These words of sane advice works wonder for her as she ends the book on a positive note of making one's world better with one's own efforts. Thus, it can be concluded that her autobiography *From Fear Set Free* is book that narrates not only the events of historic importance but also of the personal voyage of the writer in which the intricacies of love, marriage and man-woman relationship are also given due consideration. The ideals of love—romantic and universal, the interpretation and significance of marriage in India (particularly for a woman), and the working of man-woman relationship in which one must set oneself free from the clutches of fear, these have been dealt with utmost care. Hence, the text of *From Fear Set Free* becomes a valuable account of the personal life of the author in which she gives much attention to the fundamental issues of life.

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