

Breakdown and Disintegration of the Institution of Marriage in Storm in Chandigarh and This Time of Morning

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Abstract:

As a feminist writer, Nayantara Sahgal deals with female issues and place of married women in varied ways in post Independent India. She portrays women and how their domestic existence and married life deprives them of all their joy and freedom. She does not like inaction and passivity for her female characters. She imperceptibly and subtly conveys her message of revolt and courage through her own decision to walk out of marriage that had become a kind of death in life for her. This is true of all her married women too. Her married couples grapple with emotional crisis in their lives. They are broken hearted, emotionally incompatible and socially unstable. They suffer from loneliness even in the company of their partners. Their male partners remain oblivious to this crisis in their lives as they are preoccupied with materialistic considerations. In most of the cases, male partners ruin the relationship as they are too much rooted in patriarchy and thus incompatible with the modern outlook of their wives. While the female partners are always in search of self discovery and self exploration, her male partners are victims of stereotyped image of women and thereby refuse to acknowledge equality and freedom of their partners. The author tries to dismantle the old age notions of women being inferior and man superior. Her female characters are educated and rebel and they are against being used just as piece of furniture and objects of sex. They look for a world beyond their domestic spheres. But husbands rooted in patriarchy resist this desire and refuse to acknowledge them as individuals with their own minds and bodies. This results in friction in their relationships and ultimately pushes them to search for communication and response beyond the institution of marriage.

Keywords: Patriarchy, Disharmony, Feminism, Subjugation, Crisis, Discord,

Introduction:

Nayantara Sahgal's idea of marriage is a complete contrast to the traditionally accepted idea of marriage in Indian society. Tradition expects wives to surrender their individuality and remain behind the shadow of their husbands. Their goals and ambition must remain subservient to those of their husbands. They are just considered as tools of procreation as is clear from Mona's taunting words to Rose. She says in *Rich Like Us*, "Who was Rose, a failed womb, to advise breeders of children? (206). They are expected to remain passive, submissive and not to challenge the God like image of their husbands. Marriage, procreation, bringing up of husband's children are traditionally assigned role of women in parochial societies. Inder's words too reflect upon how patriarchy thinks of married women's role in Indian society. He says, "A thousand years from now a woman will still want and need a

master, the man who will own and command her---and that is the man she will respect.” (p. 92)

Nayantara Sahgal rejects this idea of marriage which keeps women subdued and subservient to their male partners. She does not conform to this stereotyped image of married women in Indian society wherein they are to surrender themselves and merge their identity with that of their husbands. She asks women to liberate themselves from these patriarchal constraints and assert their freedom and independent existence. She asks her women to relieve themselves from ancient grooves and bonds and from the stereotyped roles handed down to them for generations. She wants to establish an order wherein this vital relationship should operate on the basis of equality. In this order woman has the right to say ‘no’ to the choice of her parents. She must have the right to choose her partner. She must stay free from dependence syndrome as Chaman Nahal, a noted critic, says in *Feminism in English Fiction - Forms and Variants*:

I define feminism as a mode of existence in which the woman is free of the dependence syndrome. There is dependence syndrome whether it is husband, father, the community or a religious group. When women will free themselves of the dependence syndrome and lead a normal life, my idea of feminism materializes. (p. 17)

This is the modern notion of marriage that girls don't have to say ‘yes’ and must exercise their right to choose, accept and even reject an offer of marriage. Sahgal's unmarried female characters are seen struggling for this right to choose their partners in a society which does not recognise them as equal. Her married women are seen fighting for their freedom, equality and independent existence in their marriage set up. They are aware of their equal status and reject any idea of being subservient. They consider marriage a matter of heart and life as a joint responsibility of both the partners.

Nayantara Sahgal herself was the product of a world where liberal values reigned supreme and patriarchy held no sway. In such an atmosphere, husband and wife could no longer remain tied to traditional ways of life. She protests not against the institution of marriage but against constraints created by male dominated society. Her women characters are concerned with creating an atmosphere for equal and respectable place for themselves within that very social order and marriage. Deepak Kamboj says, “It was an adult, precisely as a wife that she had to confront a world where women were nothing if not shadows of their husbands. She discovered the world where, “in case of conflict the man’s desire must prevail” (Kamboj, p. 39)

In her works, she challenges these deeply entrenched patriarchal values and myths, and stereotyped images of women of being subservient to their male partners. Her female characters who come from upper class of politicians, bureaucrats and business throw the yoke of conservatism and orthodoxy by always taking a defiant stand against these enforced social taboos. When they find the environment too oppressive and crushing and their freedom and liberty under threat, they do not hesitate to look up for solace even in extra marital affairs and outside marriage. There is a much more harsh indictment of these patriarchal values in these lines.

Inder's fixation on Saroj's one time sexual experience during her student days becomes an insurmountable barrier in their relationship. Inder's ideas about his wife's supposed violation of chastity before her marriage are not so much irrational as tribal; though educated, he thinks of her unconsciously as a fallen woman, soiled or second hand goods, so to say. (p. 294)

The author castigates such primitive thought, patriarchal mindset and cheap mentality of society. She ensures equal space and sphere of works for women where they are free of the dependence syndrome. In *Storm in Chandigarh*, the writer talks of how women are considered in these parochial societies. She says,

Women were not a subject for discussion. They were wives, daughters, and mothers. They belonged to their men by contract or by blood. Their sphere was sexual and their job procreation. They were dependents, not individuals. When you wanted them it could be, apparently only be for sex. (p. 171)

The first married couple in *Storm in Chandigarh* is Vishal Dubey and Leela who are far away from enjoying their married life. Their marriage remains a futile search for communication and response. They were married for long but remained stranger to each other throughout their life. Dubey always felt guilty for living with Leela without love and dedication but it was beyond his capacity to fill this void of emotions. He was sincere toward Leela but there was something which he was unable to overcome. The relationship of Vishal and Leela highlights the main theme of the novel. But on the other hand, Leela was not sincere and had selfish motives. She was not true in her relationship with Dubey. She had her eyes on the luxuries Dubey could bring to her and she did not think beyond these materialistic considerations. She, as a practical and conformist, selects and chooses what is best of Vishal leaving the other part of his personality which she found of no use for herself. The following words in *Storm in Chandigarh* throw light on Leela's selfish nature:

She had selected what she had wanted of him: the distinguished escort at parties, the successful civil servant with a promising future, the husband who could be relied upon to take pains with whatever problem she took to him. And she had ignored the rest. She had given herself selectively too, what she had considered it prudent and convenient to give, and left him empty of the reality of herself". (pp. 60,61)

In the same way, Saroj in *Storm in Chandigarh* is the victim of stereotypes and false image of women in a parochial society. Her husband, Inder, belonged to a society which laid too much emphasis on sexual purity and considered it a serious moral lapse and a transgression to indulge in pre-marital affairs. He was a typical product of this patriarchal society. He applied this yardstick of sexual purity to judge the character of his wife. She is the victim merely for honestly confessing to her husband her pre marital affair she had left far behind. She was now committed to her husband and was warmly looking towards her husband's love. But this one honest confession sparks feelings of revenge in Inder. He began to subject his wife to mental agony and psychological tortures by always taunting her for past affairs. But he does not feel that way for his past affairs. Rather he is proud of his premarital

relationships with many a women and after marriage flirts with many women even establishing physical relationships. But it is neither a moral lapse for him nor does it leave any spot on his character as the society too tends to overlook such sexual transgression of male partners. He, thus, applies different yard sticks to judge his and his wife's characters. Here, Inder represents not an individual but the society. Sahgal says in *Storm in Chandigarh*:

When Inder could not sleep he resurrected the other man, the other one who had known Saroj before he had, making her marriage a mockery and a betrayal. He had stalked the man down the dark alleys of his imagination, (p. 82)

This honest confession which she thought would endear her to her husband turned out to be a fatal tragedy in her married life. The magnified images of her past began to haunt him and she was guilty in his eyes. He had read somewhere that there were primitive societies who demanded the blood of virginity as a proof of female purity. Saroj tried to dispel swelling doubts from her husband's mind but all in vain. He was wild with revenge of the man in Saroj's past life. Haunting images of her past affair had closed his eyes to anything good in Saroj. There is indictment of this too much emphasis on sexual purity by the writer. She says in *Storm in Chandigarh*, "The past rose in dreadful images to taunt his manhood. Jealousy had caught him unprepared". The following words throw further light on the patriarchal mindset of Inder devoid of any logic and reason. "If the woman you had married, thought Inder, had slept with another man, knives shall twist in your vitals". (p. 86)

Inder represents patriarchal values which put high premium on sexual purity and modesty of women before marriage. Its duplicity and double standard can be gauged from the fact that Inder himself flirts with Mara. He is a typical product of male dominated society and any deviation from socially defined role of women resents and infuriates him. This is amply clear when he reacts to Mara's question if Saroj was indulging in extra marital affairs. He says in *Storm in Chandigarh*:

That kind of remark disgusts me. The thinking behind it disgusts. There was a time when such things could not be spoken or even thought, except with shame. There is no shame nowadays, no barriers. Everything is taken lightly. And women talk and behave like men. (p. 92)

Jit and Mara is another unhappy married couple in the novel. Their relationship is almost a complete contrast to that of Saroj and Inder. Unlike Inder who was ill-tempered, unreasonable and rooted in patriarchy, Jit was rational, practical and very liberal in his attitudes. Jit learns from Vishal Dubey that man has not developed from the days of his cave life as he still live together without having any idea of what was happening to each other. Jit rightly understands that in the cave theory of Vishal, cave stands for non-communication, hypocrisy and darkness. (Sumakiran, 2004) Here it was not a lack of response or communication that caused void in the married life of Jit and Mara. Neither was it temperamental incompatibility nor conservative mind of Jit. But here was something deeper and psychological that marred their marriage and happy existence. To overcome her sense of loneliness and alienation, Mara runs a school for kids, yet she is unable to fill the emotional void in her life. Jit, Mara's husband, was considerate, liberal and open minded but it was not without its share of estrangement, misgivings and marital problems. Theirs is the

psychological problem and not a physical one. Jit despite being sweet and considerate could not fill the void in her life. She suffers from loneliness and emotional crisis in her married life. Her marriage seems to have added no meaning to her life. She even now feels incomplete in herself. There was something missing in her life. And she was always in search of that response and involvement. She needed company and response and that is poignantly missing in her life. These words in *Storm in Chandigarh*, “She only knew she could not belong. She did not even feel a part of her school. Even there in that part of her own creation she was an outsider looking in. And at every step in its creation there had been problems to face” reflect painfully upon her married life. (p. 86)

Despite Jit being sweet and caring with rational outlook, Mara gets drawn to Inder, a person rooted in patriarchy. They both found themselves responding and communicating to each other. They began to enjoy and experience happiness and fulfilment in the beginning of their relationships. Inder who could not think beyond sex in his relationship with Saroj for the first time realizes that love incorporates a sense of involvement and deep attachment. He undergoes some transformation and there is marked shift in his behaviour too. He could not experience and enjoy a sense of emotional attachment with Saroj. But this new relationship that took roots when he went to drop his kids to Mara’s school filled him with a new kind of experience and new revelations about love. He says to Mara in *Storm in Chandigarh*, “Do you know the strangest thing about you, Tamara? Talking to you and kissing are all the same. It all blends. I do not know where one leaves off and the other begins. (p. 173) Thus, Mara too responds to her desires. She continues to remain on extra marital affairs with him with whose failure as husband of Saroj she was fully familiar. She was in search of the best of anything. She wanted to “lay hands on and the best of each—the softness of Jit and hardness of Inder”. She was intelligent and had an eye upon the consequences of what her actions would lead to.

Like Sahgal’s *Storm in Chandigarh* and its sequel *The Day in Shadow, This Time of Morning* too is autobiographical in nature. Married women in this novel echo the author herself as they too face the same problem in their married lives as the author did in hers. This novel build on her personal experience and the sufferings she encountered. Sahgal deals here too with the patriarchal society, a husband –centred world, where women instead of having independent identities are identified by their husbands. Their aspirations and choices are subservient to those of their husbands. They are judged by their capacity of procreations. Endurance is considered a test of character. Obedience without questions is trait of good wives. This attitude was not confined only to the lower strata of the society but to the affluent class as well as her women largely belong to the opulent class.

Sahgal believes that the concept of freedom includes the full expression of one’s personality and being able to discover her true self and realise her dreams. She firmly believes that relationships can better be realized by accepting and acknowledging each others’ dreams and ideals. Any attempt to dilute and merge someone else’s individuality can be fatal. The breakdown of marriages in her works bear ample evidence to this fact. Her protagonists display amazing capabilities to communicate, argue, debate and discuss the issues and ultimately find a solution to the problems. But women in her novels are denied this freedom of thought by their patriarchal husbands which results in the failures of marriages as

an institution. Freedom in her opinion is not antithetical to the idea of good and stable relationship but adds to its beauty, joy and above all to its stability.

In *This Time of Morning*, the author widens her search. Her female characters are bold enough to walk out if they find their marriage suffocating and their husbands uncaring. There are two set of characters who offer us a study between older and younger generations' contrasting outlook toward marriage life. On one hand we have Mira, devoted wife of Kailas, who too is the victim of emotional cruelty of her husband and has rarely enjoyed the bliss of her married life. But she now is happy as she has surrendered her individuality and merged her identity with that of her husband. She now feels proud to stay behind the shadow of her husband. She no longer demands freedom and individuality from her husband. She is proud to say in *This Time of Morning*, "To share him with his country, with his toil, and not share him so much, as take what was left of him afterwards." (p. 48) She achieves bliss in life as she decides to surrenders her every wish and dream for those of her husband. Another couple representing older generation's view is Dr Narang and his wife. They, though English educated and modern in outlook, resorts to extreme form of patriarchy while they come to decide for their daughter's marriage. Mrs. Narang says, "We don't allow Nita to go out alone. Her father would not hear of it." (p. 30) This is enough to understand the contrast between Nita and her parents.

Rashmi and Nita represent the modern and younger generation's view. They seek freedom, equality and independence. They do not remain passive and submit to the unjust wishes of their male partners. They do not subscribe to the idea of husband being masters of their destiny. They have the courage to say 'no'. They are assertive and do not think twice before walking out if the institution of marriage fails to help them realize their cherished dreams. Rightly remarks Deepak Kamboj, "More than Rashmi, it is Nita whose search for selfhood is more pronounced. If Rashmi is searching for a place in society after a bitter experience in marriage, in the character of Nita, Sahgal explores the place of women in Indian society before marriage." (Kamboj, p. 45)

Rashmi was a modern girl of Mira and Kailas who are the product of patriarchal society. They never tried to understand the psyche of their daughter. They married her to Dalip, a complete contrast to her romantic ideals and dreams. As a result, she very soon got disillusioned with her husband. The author writes in *This Time of Morning*, "Delhi provided a respite from the clashes that had become her relationship with Dalip, from the deadening trauma out off which it seemed no feeling could ever again emerge... I do not wish him harm, but he and I she could not even think 'we' any longer-cannot go on together." (p. 12). For Rashmi there is no possibility of compromise as far as her freedom and existence as an individual is concerned. She is a woman who believes in enjoying life. But here she loses out all joys of life after being married to Dalip, a person of her parents' choice. Rashmi indirectly criticises her parents' wrong selection of her partner when she says, "Since marriage can be so unhappy, I suppose it can be happy too with the right ingredients" (p. 197). She finally decides to walk out of her caged marriage with her husband but her conventional upbringing comes in her way. Her family upbringing had taught her that marriage was an unbreakable bond and lifelong commitment. Her mother Mira had faced all these difficulties in initial

years of her married life and expected Rashmi too to reconcile to her fate and stay happily married. She belonged to ‘a fast disappearing race of women for whom endurance was a test of character’. (p. 204) She turns to her parents for solace but her parents could never suggest any solution outside her married life with Dalip. She was fully aware of this fact. When she breaks off her relationship with Dalip, her mother was very upset as she could never persuade herself to any thought of breakup. The following words throw ample light on how Mira felt when she got the news.

Rashmi’s announcement was worse than bad news. It was a mortal blow to all she held sacred. What had brought Rashmi to this pass? What reason under heaven could sever the marriage bond? Women stayed married, had since time immemorial stayed married, under every conceivable circumstance to brutal insensitive husbands, to lunatic and lepers. And Dalip, God forbid, was none of these things.

Besides Rashmi, Nita is another victim of an unhappy marriage. She is an independent mind girl who hates all established values. She wanted to explore herself but her family would not allow it. She wanted to live life on her own terms. As her family put restrictions on her movements, she was never her real self before the eyes of her parents. But away from home, she became her real self, participating in dance clubs and smoking cigarettes. Whenever she got the opportunity to come out of these constraints, she made the most of such rarely available opportunities. She hated the idea of parcel bride. She wanted to marry only when she has found a soul mate without any dictate from the parents and society. She wanted someone who can share her mind, dreams and ideals. Mrs Narang instead of taking into account her daughter’s opinion about her partners chides her. “I cannot understand what you want out of life,” her mother fretted. ‘After all, you never really know a man till you marry him.’ (p. 206)

Nita was finally married to Vijay against her wishes. Her parents were busy preparing for her marriage. Her mother had been collecting a trousseau for her for years. Her father was going to give a bank account of lakh on her marriage day. But she was unhappy as she was being married against her wishes. These words painfully reflect upon her plight. “What about her body and its desires, she wanted to cry out, the body that pulsate for something with urgency she had never known? A month later her future was decided and she had acquiesced to it”

To conclude, a mere study of these two novels makes us aware of how these married couples remain far away from enjoying life despite living in each other’s company. They are husbands and wives yet they are always in search of response outside marriage. This exposes the hollowness of the institution of marriage. Marriage as an institution seems to lose out its utility and its very foundations crumble down. There is always lack of something in the life of all these individuals and characters. Throughout these two novels, they run after it. There is lack of sincerity in their relationships and marriage seems to be simply based on pretence, artificiality and on fake values without sense of response and involvement. There is also a lack of acceptance and acknowledgement of each other as individuals and persons. Too much

emphasis on patriarchal values where a woman is almost devoid of her individual existence and where her existence is attached to the existence of her husband are some of the factors responsible for ever increasing and widening gap and emotional void in their lives. Furthermore, the two starkly different backgrounds and diametrically opposite environments in which the characters were brought up and educated are a great cause for temperamental incompatibility which ends up spoiling their relationships. The writer herself seems to have consciously put bitter experiences of her own life in these two texts. Her female characters represent her and reflect upon ideals she idealized and professed. They are a reflection upon her married life. The problems they encounter and the mental agonies they suffer from are illustrative of how she suffered and underwent these turmoils throughout her life. Saroj's walking out of Inder's home and going to Delhi counselled by Vishal Dubey to seek communication and response shows Sahgal's own divorce from Gautam Sahgal and her final decision to marry Mangat Rai.

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