



## CROSSING THE BAR OF PATRIARCHAL PARADIGMS: A STUDY OF THE RECENT TRENDS IN THE WORKS OF NAYANTARA SAHGAL AND MANJU KAPUR

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### ABSTRACT :

Indians have always been recognized globally for their writings. Not only the male writers, but the female writers are also breaking into the field of global writings with their bold and revolutionary perspectives. These contemporary women writers feel the pulse of 21<sup>st</sup> century India and the communities they are part of. In spite of the various obstacles and impediments of gender discrimination put in the path of these writers, they are not only crossing the bar of patriarchal paradigms but also establishing their separate entity and individuality through their works. Writers like Arundhati Roy, Anita Desai, Jhumpa Lahiri, Shashi Deshpande, Mahasweta Devi, Meena Kandaswami, Madhuri Banerjee and Shobha De are one of those who are high lighting the issues of current politics, society, and of day today life – issues highly spoken of publicly as well as in hushed whispers – with bold and distinctively women's perspectives in their writings.

In present paper an attempt has been done to analyze this changed perspective in the works of Nayantara Sahgal and Manju Kapur with which they are attempting a wide variety of offbeat themes, genres and literary formats.

**KEYWORDS :** Contemporary, Revolutionary, Feel the Pulse, Patriarchal, Paradigms, Offbeat themes.

### INTRODUCTION

Today's women  
Born yesterday  
Dealing with tomorrow  
Not yet where we are going  
But not still where we were

**Adrienne Rich**

Despite of occupying almost fifty percent of the total population in the country, Indian women have suffered from the sting of gender discrimination and silent persecution without any reason. From cradle to the grave they are bound to abide by the rules and regulations set by the patriarchal society. Man governs and controls all the affairs of the family, including financial matters, which is the most vital reason for subjugating the rights of women. As a result, women have confined themselves to the task of household responsibilities only.

But history is the evidence that in spite of the various obstacles and impediments put in the path of



women by the patriarchal society, women are struggling hard for their separate entity and individuality. In India, an extraordinary upheaval in the life of the women came with the writings of female writers in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the beginning the feminist writers brought about a pathetic concern for the women, enduring the obnoxious exploitation calmly, accepting the aged old taboos silently and acknowledging their position of silent sufferers. But gradually the radical sect came up with a drastic demand of eradicating every prejudice on women with peerless valour to highlight the harsh realities of society with a dauntless mode of writing and by touching upon new and revolutionary trends. As a result a new image of unfettered woman emerged – “Here she comes running, out of prison and off the pedestal; chains off, crown off, halo off, just a live woman”(Perkin, 159). Betty Friedan in *The Feminine Mystique* voices the prevalent trend: “For women as for men, the need for self-fulfillment, autonomy, self realization independence, individuality, self actualization is as important as the sexual need, with as serious consequences when it is thwarted”(Friedan, 221).

Now the Indo Anglian women writers are moving away from projecting the traditional, enduring, submissive, and self sacrificing women towards conflicted female characters searching for self identity. Meena Shirwadkar in her book, *Images of woman in the Indo Anglian novel*, claims that “Tradition, transition and modernity’ are the stages through which the woman in Indo Anglian novel is passing”. (Shirwadkar, 153-54) The novelists have started writing about those feminine issues which were not supposed to be spoken in public in the society, very boldly, practically and with distinctively women’s perspective in their writings. The present paper is an attempt to study the recent trends in the works of Nayantara Sahgal and Manju Kapur.

Among the writers who have portrayed a ‘new woman’ who is inclined to take the ‘road not taken’ and walking on their own road is Nayantara Sahgal. In contrast to the persistent traditional construction of the Indian woman as a passive victim, she has written prolifically and movingly, of woman negotiating and restricting the patriarchy that determine and shape their lives in diverse situations. She has not only depicted women suffering due to sexist bias in the patriarchal society, but also envisions a world which should be based on equality and harmony between two sexes. Her stand on woman, her female sexuality and the concern with a woman’s right to her body is both unconventional and subversive.

Being fostered amidst the congenial atmosphere with liberal ideas, she quite naturally inculcated boldness and frankness in her outlook which is reflected very clearly through her women characters. Simrit in *‘The Day in Shadow’* represents those women of Indian Hindu society who are inspired by a sense of good and ideal family values. On the other hand, her husband is a typical traditional, materialistic person full of insensitivity and negativity for her. Sahgal remarks; “She is symbolic of the Hindu race; she is not an individual, she is a culture, a tradition, a patient, enduring passivity”. (Sahgal, 18) She truly represents the average, acquiescent woman who allows her to be exploited because she is not part of the creating active world. But towards the end of the novel, like a true feminist, Simrit moves out of her husband’s home. She becomes aware of her own identity, existence and rights. She tells Raj:

“Do you know why I came? It was to tell you. I’d got rid of my guilts. It was gone without a trace and in its place there was a strong positive feeling. If feeling have smells, this was a clear, carbonic, disinfectant smell.”(Sahgal, 208)

Similarly Saroj in *‘Storm in Chandigarh’* represents those who are instrumental in letting violence spread and engulf them. Her married life is a failure because it is not based on love, patience and trust. Her husband Inder never treats her as a friend because he is obsessed with her premarital lapse. She very sincerely involves in her marriage to Inder but he persists in raking up the past making Saroj beat against his “numbness like a bird against a windowpane trapped in a futile frenzy.”(Sahgal, 97) Sahgal makes Saroj act like a new woman who liberates herself from the shackles of a rude and brutal husband for the sake of achieving a sense of equality and self reliance.

*Mistaken Identity* culminates Sahgal’s quest for emancipation of woman. Here she portrays the women characters that are exceptionally bold and revolutionary in their outlook. Sylla, a Parsi modern woman is portrayed as intellectual and modern girl who puts on modern costumes and frankly discusses things with Bhushan. If the term feminine denotes something weaker, then Bhushan admits that before versatile Sylla, “I was more feminine”. (150) She hates leaving Bombay for Vijaygarh because she can never

let herself confined in orthodoxy bounds. When she finds no good reason to continue her relation with Bhushan, she writes: "I am not a log and you are not a drowning man. There has to be a better reason for being together." (163)

Another character from the same novel is Razia, a radical Muslim girl who dares transcend her culture for the sake of love. For her lover Bhushan, she is an everlasting symbol of secularism. Their constant meetings offered them space for making love. Unlike other female characters of Mrs Sahgal, Razia is delineated with an exceptional boldness, who not after long interactions forms physical bound to him. She dauntlessly gets intimate with him.

Willie-May is comparatively a minor character in the same novel, but she is also portrayed with an ultra modern outlook. She supports sex and discusses it with Bhushan quite openly. To her, sex is good for mental and physical fitness of a person; "people who did not get plenty of it went crazy or got wrinkle." (130)

Ranee of Vijaygarh is Bhushan's mother who is uneducated but owns a sense of individuality in good deal. While introducing her in the novel he says: "Anything that defies explanation makes perfect sense to the mother. The traditional five senses have never been enough for her. She has to have something more." (25) Though she is uneducated, has an apathetic husband, has nothing to look forward to, she dares shun her husband from her life when she discovers the man does not respect her. When he marries for the third time, this woman behind the veil breaks all ties with her husband; she breaks free from all inhibitions and marries comrade Yusuf; "Early one morning she left the family mansion I saw her hesitate for a second at the entrance and hold her breath before she walked out to star in the most sensational scandal of the generation". (238) Thus Ranee of Vijaygarh, though a nameless character marks the culmination of the march of Sahgal's 'new woman' towards freedom.

Rashmi of the novel '*This Time of Morning*' seeks an extramarital affair to heal her injured married life. Like other women characters she seeks consolation from outside, not to content her physical and sexual urges but because she just wants to fill the space her husband has left vacant. Talking of feminist awakening in herself, Sahgal confesses in her letter to Neena Arora; "I have come to this awakening rather late, although I have personally always been independent minded. That is not enough, I think if one cares, one must project and ally oneself with one's beliefs. I think I do this more now as regards feminism" (Arora, 115)

The fiction of Manju Kapur is also replete with the new trends regarding women and her revolutionary outlook towards life. She very frankly discusses distinct women experiences and issues of sex in all her novels. *Difficult Daughters* spans three generations of women and unveils their sense of disillusionment. These three generations actually represent three stages of Indian Independence. Kasturi, the mother represents the pre independence period and is shown as a victim of the offensive control of the patriarchy. She, like a traditional mother compels her daughter Virmati to follow every norms of society. Her education has been less important than her position in the society.

Virmati the daughter represents the country's struggle for independence as she too rebels against convention of morality. She like a new woman violates these norms when she indulges in a scandalous affair with a married professor. She suffers throughout her life with Harish and regrets her decision of leaving home. She teaches Ida, her daughter to 'adjust, compromise, adapt'. On this nature of a mother, Simon De Beauvoir remarks: "Sometimes she tries to impose on the child exactly her own fate. What was good enough for me is good enough for you, I was brought up this way, and you shall share my lot." (Beauvoir, 533-34)

Ida is the product of post independence and establishes herself as the independent woman. She also challenges the norms set by her mother Virmati as Virmati did to Kasturi. Ida also condemns choosing a domestic and maternal life for herself. Thus, this novel portrays an actual change in the attitude of women after going through unbearable torture in a biased society.

*A Married Woman* draws much critical attention among reading public for its radical theme of a seductive love relationship between two women. A country where honour killing of a girl for loving a person of opposite sex still persists, issue of loving the same sex became vehemently sensational. It is probably the

first attempt in Indian history to come up with such an ultra radical theme of lesbian love. The novel portrays Astha, a bold and modern girl, with all her acts of liberation, demanding spirit, including her affair with Rohan, marriage with Hemant and finally her emotional and sensational homosexual love with Pipeelika Trivedi. She, like other heroines of Manju Kapur is educated and awakened and condemns all the illogical notions of orthodoxy. When her mother tries to convince her for marriage by saying; -

“When you are married, our responsibilities will be over. Do you know the shastras say if parents die without getting their daughter married, they will be condemned to perpetual rebirth?”(Kapur, 1). She replies with a revolutionary spirit of a new woman, “I don’t believe in all the stuff and I think as an educated person, neither should you.” (Ibid)

She feels passionate love for Rohan, and does not hesitate making physical relations with him; “When Rohan at last, slid his tongue into Astha’s mouth she putty in his hand. Her neck, her ears, her throat, eyes, and chin, all had been explored and this time her strongest feeling was gratitude.”(24) When Rohan deserts her, she marries Hemant, the boy of her parents’ choice being fascinated by his progressive thoughts of defying dowry. When she finds Hemant’s interest declining for her and her position, reducing to an inanimate thing like furniture, she gets fed up with it. Now home is not a place of peace, but a snare to trap her in the name of obligation; “She was fed up with the idea of Indian womanhood, used to trap and jail”.(168)

Pipeelika is another character of strong and ultra radical outlook. In spite of her parents strong opposition she marries Aizaz. After marriage, she very frankly narrates her sensational past of having a lesbian relationship with a girl Samira; “It was in school that I first fell in love and now I am coming on my honeymoon. I feel strange when I think about it, that’s all”.(129) After the death of Aizaz she meets Astha. They both share same instinct of loneliness and a bond of companionship is formed between them. Here Manju Kapur very boldly expresses the mental and physical urges of lesbians through these two characters; “She (Astha) started to fantasies about touching her, imagined her hair between her fingers, her shin beneath her own, her hands on the back of her neck”.(225) Gradually Astha learns how to deny a husband who reduces his wife’s position to satisfy his bodily hunger, “Do I have to give it just because you are my husband? Unless I feel close to you, I can’t. I am not a sex object, you have others for that”.(Ibid)21

This cheerful relationship slightly jerks when Astha leaves for Hemant’s care from chronic heart disease. Her inability to fling other obligations for Pipee’s sake ruins their relation. When Astha shares a beautiful fantasy along with some despairing images, Pipeelika very practically answers; “you want me and you want not to leave your old life. It’s a nice fantasy”(214) and she leaves for abroad to pursue Ph.D.

The novel *Home* talks about the hazards of dowry through the character of Sunita, who is burnt by her husband. The protagonist Nisha, Sona’s daughter is a bold and educated girl, but she also undergoes a number of turmoil during the course of this novel. Unlike Astha she does not negotiate with patriarchy pacts and determines to live independently.

The novel *Immigrants* focuses on the theme of man- woman relationship. Nina, after getting married to Anand, comes to know the sexual weakness of her husband and forms an extramarital affair with Rahul, her colleague. She gets the jerks of negligence from Rahul after she gets physical intercourse with him. Though Manju Kapur had never supported extra marital sex independence and lesbianism or any other form or extremity, she might be the first among the Indian feminist writers who have innovated rebellious spirit with her women characters. In this novel she has also discussed with an extreme sense of boldness the fundamental carnal needs of a woman and the consequences if they are not fulfilled;

“For years and years Nina had masturbated, hoping the day would come when a loving partner would circumvent the furtive, dissatisfied feeling this left her with...After dinner, when she tried to get cozy with Ananda he would often say later, I am tired. And Nina would feel humiliated at what seemed a reversal of gender roles.”( 179)

Thus we see that time has really changed. In present scenario the Indian women writers not only Manju Kapur and Nayantara Sahgal but others, including Arundhati Roy, Anita Desai, Jhumpa Lahiri, Shashi Deshpande, Madhuri Banerjee, Shobha De, etc. also are dealing with a wide variety of offbeat themes and

issues which were not supposed to be discussed in public in the society. By giving voice to these revolutionary trends in their works, they attempt to move from silence into speech for the oppressed and exploited ones. They are developing their own literature in which a new woman is emerging out. A woman who has left her past, with all its anger, tears and bitterness. She has stopped whining in self pity. She has realized that happiness is a personal choice and responsibility and for it, she does not need any validation for anyone. As a result, she is crossing the bar intentionally set up by the patriarchy for her in the society.

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