

# Feministic Perspectives in Nayantara Sahgal's *A Time To Be Happy*

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**Abstract:** Though Sahgal has engraved a niche for herself chiefly as a political novelist, her feminist concern is quite noticeable and her fighter spirit quite articulated in her fiction. Sahgal's concern for women, however, is that of a humanist more than it is of a feminist. Woman suffers not only by man's act of physical violence, but she is often sympathetically hurt and crippled through his selfishness, skepticism and indifference. The title of the novel *A Time to Be Happy* indicates there is a dawn of freedom, but its implications are sarcastic; the political freedom alone will not make certain real happiness in life, unless people have economic independence and revolutionize their out-look on man woman relationship. In the novel, the action begins and ends on a symbolic note signifying the end of an epoch and an innovative beginning.

**Keywords:** Economic dependence, Empowerment, Feministic issues, marital discord and Subjugation.

Nayantra Sahgal is often described as a political woman novelist. Her novels present a society steeped in politics, where women find themselves compressed and subjugated. The traumatic experiences they face in their struggle to come out of oppression are pragmatically portrayed in the novels of Sahgal. In her fictional world there is an emphasis on freedom and a new definition of the 'virtuous woman'. Due to the injustice meted to them in their marriages the protagonist walk out of their homes. Divorce is a viable strategy by which the subdued woman emancipates herself to find a more meaningful life. And yet, it is by no means an uncomplicated decision, to reconcile with the emotional trauma deeply entrenched marital ties.

Though Sahgal has engraved a niche for herself chiefly as a political novelist, her feminist concern is quite noticeable and her fighter spirit quite articulated in her fiction. Sahgal's concern for women, however, is that of a humanist more than it is of a feminist. Woman suffers not only by man's act of physical violence, but she is often sympathetically hurt and crippled through his selfishness, skepticism and indifference. Loneliness, anguish and frustration in marriage sometimes cause collapse and make women more mutinous. It is not physical loneliness that Sahgal talks of, but deeper emotional and spiritual voids created by male chauvinistic self-centered attitudes.

Sahgal's *A Time to be Happy* is a fictional enactment of the growth of a young, westernized and wealthy Indian against the back-drop of India's struggle for independence on the one hand and the detachment of the British Indian officers and their wives as well as their Indian admirers on the other.

The title of the novel *A Time to Be Happy* indicates there is a dawn of freedom, but its implications are sarcastic; the political freedom alone will not make certain real happiness in life, unless people have economic independence and revolutionize their out-look on man woman relationship. In the novel, the action begins and ends on a symbolic note signifying the end of an epoch and an innovative beginning. The novel *A Time to Be Happy* is set in the immediate pre and post independent period and deals with the East-West encounter, the impact of English on western education, the burning desire for identity and roots, marriage and Hinduism.

Sahgal presents three generations of couples, all of whose marriages except that of Sanad and Kusum are arranged marriages. The mother of the narrator and Ammaji, the mother of Govind Narayan, belong to the first generation. The narrator of the novel points out that his unconventional father and his conventional mother are amazingly suited to each other in spite of their disagreements as their marriage has been lasted more than fifty years. His mother believes that the husband's apprehension was with God and the wife's concern is with God in him. There is no circumstance for conflict as she compromised with her husband.

Ammaji, though she belongs to the older generation, has a strong will power to sustain her actual personality. Ammaji's husband like most men never tries to comprehend her emotions, requirements and hopes. Instead he cunningly avoids situations which would generate chances for any disagreement. Finally, she compromises to her lot and becomes submissive like a representative Indian woman and this saves their marital bond from any possible damage. She acknowledged, "All my needs are here within the house'. What is there for me in the world outside? You who are young must enjoy yourselves. "For me the worldly life is over and the time of contemplation has begun". (29)

Lakshmi, the wife of Govind Narayan and Maya, the wife of Harish belong to the second generation. Lakshmi's marriage to Govind Narayan is an arranged marriage which is often well thought-out of a concrete constant composition, factual and built on the theory that affection and mutual reciprocation could rationally be expected to flourish between partners of the same social, religious and provincial background. Lakshmi is a person satisfied to be a woman, glorying in her femininity whereas Govind Narayan, is a person who is still living in the period of Nawabs. They are perfectly matched to each other and there is no occasion for them to face any serious divergence.

But Maya is the forerunner of Mrs.Sahgal's women protagonists who are the victims of marital incompatibility. Maya is a woman of 'ideal character' who is not willing to submerge her personality. The first character of Sahgal, Maya Shivpal is who starts the journey towards self- realization. Maya has enjoyed an affluent and happy background with her parents before marriage. Her charisma has been very much enjoyed by the family members. Her individual interests and desires have been honoured at home. But her marriage to Harish is destined right from the beginning. Sahgal shows great compassion for women who are married into different backgrounds. They need time and understanding from their husbands, at the least to fine-tune to their new surroundings but they hardly ever get these comforts.

Maya finds out that she can easily communicate with the narrator and they fall in love. But she cannot think of a divorce. She does not try to escape and have an extra marital affair. The Narrator cannot communicate his love for her as both of them have remarkable conviction in the indissolubility of marriage. It takes a long time for the Narrator to recover the ground and to conduct himself with her in a casual way. He makes himself more involved in the activities of congress as a volunteer as he wants to withdraw himself from the embarrassing encounters with Maya. As a consequence Maya has to lead a life of estrangement and loneliness.

Maya surprises the reader with her singularity. She is not aggressive, but she is separated from her surrounds. She finds herself like a fish out of water and she is unable to remain unspoken and contented by serving her husband like the Narrator's mother. She could not live as the shadow of her husband. She is a woman with ambitions and aspirations. Her dreams of self-determination and self- realization take her to rural India. She has a natural instinct towards communal work and she feels very much satisfied with her service in the villages.

Harish Maya's husband feels more at home in Paris and Rome than in India. He and his wife Maya live in two different worlds. He gives more importance to money and power than human feelings and emotions. Maya's expectations in life are more psychological. Harish and Maya are opposing personalities. They are a mismatched couple as she is not fascinated in anything Harish likes. She never goes to the club with him, and if she attends such parties she remains silence.

Maya is influenced by the narrator and seems to find her companion in him. They know that they love each other, but the moment of this understanding dawn they are aware of their beginning and an end to this relationship. They know the marriage ties are permanent and there is no way out for them. She is not the new woman to challenge convention. She controls her mind and liberates herself from the companionship of the narrator. She finds a novel way to self fulfillment by joining the freedom movement and preaching Gandhian ideology to simple village folk.

Coming to the marital relationship between Sanad and Kusum, it is Kusum who is maintaining the relationship at the initial stage because of her endurance. Though she has no interest in the world of Sanad, she changes herself to the level of attending clubs, wearing high heels and drinking in cocktail parties for the sake of maintaining marital harmony. Their marital relationship is saved as Kusum has learnt the art of being accommodative.

The change in Kusum is a silent transformation from one world to another. There is no conflict, revolt or resentment in her. She is able to ascertain herself and her house in the way she would have liked to, and is happy in her own unemotional world, quite different from the noble grandeur of her mother's house, with its invaluable objects of art, luxurious carpets and splendid buildings. Finally, Sanad and Kusum discern each other because they have discovered the truth about themselves.

*A Time to Be Happy* is set in the background of the Quit India Movement. There are some first generations, second generation and third generation of couples in the novel. Though all the couples appear to be happy, they have a profound pain in their hearts. Except Sanad and Kusum's marriage all other marriages are arranged marriages. All the marriages continue to exist till the end and the marital bond is not busted in any of the cases. But that is not evidence that all the couples are contented. The marital harmony is maintained because of the societal conventions and the moral fear of the society. Though they are not perfect couples to each other and howsoever their match may be wrong, the women in this novel do not dare to come out of their homes or to break their marriages ties.

Sahgal is straighter in her feminist sympathies than the other writers. She makes a systematic and sustained effort to destroy the deeply entrenched attitudes regarding women, before indicating ways in which a new image can be formulated. With an estimable obligation, she upholds her commitment to man-woman relationships based on mutual trust and honest communication between two individuals. Man-woman relationship is the component of individual and social life and hence it has been the central theme of the novelists all over the world.

The need to keep women economically independent is one of the main objectives of feminist ideology. The subordination of women is due to the economic dependence which exerts control over women's sexuality. The concept and image of women has undergone an optimistic change. No society can step forward without an energetic participation of women who are an essential part of human civilization in its over-all development.

Sahgal is a writer par excellence when she deals with human issues which are of interest to all humanity. Her works, therefore, constitute an outstanding contribution to Indian literature in English. Sahgal

evinces keen interest in the empowerment of women in the multifaceted aspects of life. The women of Sahgal face fearsome challenges to accomplish their rightful place in the society.

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