

Individual Freedom and Gender Identity: A Comparative Study on Nayantara Sahgal's "A Time to be Happy" And Anita Nair's "Ladies Coupe"

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Article Info

Volume 83

Page Number: 16768 - 16771

Publication Issue:

March - April 2020

Abstract

The present paper is comparative study between Nayantara Sahgal and Anita Nair regarding the exploration of the predicament of women in terms of Individual freedom and gender identity. Both the novelists have conspicuously placed themselves in the world literature. Both the writers have brought forward something new related to individual freedom of women and their gender identity. Both expressed the view that women in the present society still are suppressed by the patriarchal society. Nair stresses on the identity of women while Sahgal tries to establish the concept of new women. However, both the novelists uniformly observe and analyze the plights of women with different psychological and social visions. This paper finds that the suppression and identity struggle are the one and the same in the light of new women concepts where both the novelists tried to express with unique expressions.

Article History

Article Received: 24 July 2019

Revised: 12 September 2019

Accepted: 15 February 2020

Publication: 27 April 2020

Keywords: individual freedom, gender identity, comparative study, suppression and universal.

Women play a critical role in the life of every one. She proves to be a constant source of interest and inspiration for the development of individual. Modern Indian women are different from other women in many aspects of thought and practice. Particularly middle class women in India, now a days, have a quick change in dress, articulation and uncovered to various streams of learning. The metamorphosis of women from agriculture to aeronautics, Indian women is dynamic in professional and public life. It encouraged many of Post Independent and

Diaspora writers from the region to expose the feelings and emotions of Indian women to the world. In this context, Nanantara Sahgal and Anita Nair have no exception in highlighting the Individual Freedom and Gender Identity. Their writings reflect their anxiety for upliftment of human values by stressing women identity and freedom. While exploring various ways of identity and freedom they never try to dislocate contemporary social and political issues from the life. Their female characters are silenced in the face of their oppression under a patriarchal

system. There is no ambiguity in the fact that women are dispossessed of their endurance as absolute as human beings but they are poor of the opportunity to make an exposure of their emotions, their worries and their anguish.

Sahgal focuses a strong emotion towards individual freedom and make an important content of the novel that sprints through all her fiction. It is a kind of human wakefulness of the connotations of liberty. She makes it very clear in her every novel about the major concept of her writing is to liberate women from the suppression and explains them in the context of national struggle to liberate from ruler to rule. Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupé* tells the readers about the journey of women along with the other women characters, finding their identity. Akhila, the protagonist stands for the independence of women within themselves. It signifies the life of women in India, who are defeated by fate and society resulting in the consequential activities of their life. Sahgal's "A Time to be Happy" deals with the liberation of the individual for achieving the objective. It explores the upper middle class Indian situations in portraying interpersonal relationships between the ruler and ruled at national level and also at domestic level. As the observer, the narrator stresses the happiness in life means liberation of individual at all levels. In Nair's novel, "Ladies Coupe" women personal happiness and independence is linked with the happiness of the husband. Though she possesses with all needed abilities like courage, strength and strong will, she introverts herself as unable to do anything by depending on husband. In order to fight against the forces to suppress her from male dominated society, the protagonist decides to live alone in the rest of life.

Sanad, the protagonist of the novel, "A Time to be Happy" is in huge confusion because of his cultural dislocation and also suffers from domestic perplexing problems. In the individual

life, there is a striking difference between him and his wife Kusum who was a middle class woman. Woman has such a capacity to mould herself to the situations whereas it is a little bitter to man. Sanad cultural dislocation makes him to be disturbed and also panic sometimes even though he adjusted himself to circumstances.

He is able to understand the distinction between poverty and plenty:

"The movement, far from being a purely political one, was a great social organization, too, a channel where by even the least political-minded could help to alleviate the awe- inspiring distress of the poor of our land, I myself was never of a political turn of mind, or I might not be sitting here today in my solitary cottage, spending my hours among my books and papers, instead of seeking office in government or joining one of the numerous official and semi-official organizations that have sprung up since Independence. I worked as long as youth and health permitted, and now I am content to enjoy my leisure. I do not consider this selfish. I have earned my rest." (*A Time To Be Happy* 6-7).

Margaret Shanthi is a well educated woman in Nair's "Ladies Coupie". But she is dominated by her husband, Ebenzer Paulraj in every walk of her life. Her identity is always ignored and there is no scope for giving importance to her feelings and emotions. As a Chemistry Post Graduate, she wants to peruse her Ph D but her husband wants her to be a teacher giving priority to her physical appearance. He always advises her to cut her long hair. She bears everything in her life but burst out when her husband wants abort her. Siman de Beauvoir in her "The Second Sex" (1997) says;

"Men tend to take abortion lightly; they regard it as one of

the numerous hazards imposed on women by malignant nature” (Beauvoir 508)

Shanthi’s husband never hesitated to suggest her abort because he did not find any mistake in it. At this juncture, her inner fury comes out and she burst out but all her efforts are in vain.

“For the first time, I felt angry. All the best! What did he mean by that? Was I going to write an exam or recite a poem? Was I going to run a race or perform an experiment? All the best for what? I had nothing to do but lie there while they scraped my baby off the inside of my womb” (LC 109)

Shagal’s characters have lot of social consciousness. Exploration marriage and matrimonial bliss is of no less significance in it; it is the genesis of man and woman relationship and Nayantara Sahgal understands it well; that is why Kusum and Sanad Shivpal are happily married, while the other married couples are not so happy; the unhappiness of the narrator’s mother is caused by orthodoxy; she accepts totally the traditional injustice; it clearly indicates that an arranged marriage is not always an assurance of happiness; Kusum’s destiny is acceptable, but the fate of Maya is written with an altogether different quill; an infertile woman in India is always taunted with being sculptured in a marble; silk sarees and other items of material prosperity do not attract her; she needs a recognition of her existence:

While Lakshmi and her daughter-in-law Devika adjust easily to the circumstances of their lives, happiness eludes Maya whose barrenness is a symbol, not a cause of her unhappiness. She appears to

be a slab of marble incapable of emotion and this is the result of her emotional isolation in her marriage. (Sinha 79).

Giving birth is the source of regeneration and rebirth and also growth of civilization. The women and the nature are the exclusive part in their life. One cannot stop the natural phenomena in the name of the gender. Both of them are identical and unified forms as Indian myths say about them as Prakruti (Nature) and Parvati (Woman). Sahgal exposes the search of individuality both in marriage and in selection of partner. For Maya, the protagonist of the novel, was doomed from the beginning and herself;

“She had the cool purity of the eucalyptus, as compared with his extravagant Gulmohur. She was the mirror-smooth lake to his rushing waterfall.”

Their marriage is priced well since different poles pull towards each other. The narrator’s description of her is an important thing in life. It is the essential response which she is incapable to accept from her husband. However, she receives it from the narrator. Maya is a symbolic presentation in difference to the conventional ideal of women. In most of the cases, the mother of the Narrator extended her helping hands to support her husband in all his views and endeavour.

Sheela, a girl of 14 years who is very soft and smooth in her nature, sanctified with a deep sense of insight in *Ladies Coupe*. All her family relations are entwined with the principles of dynamics of life like the relationship between her grandmother, mother and father. Many times her grand mother exhorts her about the facts of the real life. So she attracted towards her right from the beginning of the life. She continued her attachment with her till her last breath. All her experiences with her taught her understanding levels of life into fully matured women. It exposed in many

incidents like her conversation with other fellow travellers which reflected her maturity in her attitude and emotions. Sheela is an embodiment of knowledge of three generations; her mother, her grandmother and also her own life. So she knows;

“Women turn to their mother when they have no one else to turn to. Women know that a mother alone will find it possible to unearth some shred of compassion and love that in everyone else has become ashes. Sheela knew why Ammumma sought her mother.” (Ladies Coupe 71).

Sheela is different from others, her ability to look beyond things. Woman is always treated low, thinking that they are incapable and cannot handle life without the help of men in family as well as in the society. She neglects her mother`s traditional thinking about the role of woman in the society.

Thus the paper expresses the contemporary study on individual freedom and gender identity in the select novels of Anita Nair and Nayantara Sahgal. Both the protagonists in the novels portray themselves as a new woman who reaches to pinnacle when it comes to self realization and individual freedom. Nayantara Sahgal explores how the birth consciousness makes a woman to attain freedom there by making the novel replacement. Nair exposes the complexity in the life of women and finding possible solutions to her nature of reality. Finally, it is found in both the characters that there is a common thread between two novels in terms of individual freedom and gender identity. It glorified the need of woman self realization and championing the individual freedom. Whether it is Maya, Kusum, Margaret or Akhila who ever the character may be, their final objective is to have their own freedom and identity.

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