

THE FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE IN NAYANTARA SAHGAL'S RICH LIKE US AND MARGARET ATWOOD'S SURFACING

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Abstract

The countries, which were once used to be under the British hegemony and emerged independent with the withdrawal of the British subsequently, are termed as the Commonwealth countries. These countries though differ from one another in terms of history, traditions, culture, socio-economic conditions, political and geographical identities, share a common experience of being subject nations to the serfdom of the British yoke and the collective literary inheritance of the English. Ergo, the literature contributed henceforth in English in these countries has come to be designated as commonwealth literature. This paper attempts to analyze the feminist viewpoint in the novels of Nayantara Sahgal and Margaret Atwood. Sahgal is one of the renowned contemporary women novelists in Indian Writing in English. Whereas, Atwood is one of the legendary acclaimed women writers in Canada. Liberation of women from domineering oppression of the patriarchal society in the postmodern times receives the focal point in the writings of both Sahgal and Atwood. Both of them attempt to dovetail the submissive and suppressed predicament of women in all walks of life. They seek to attack the gender-based discrimination and treatment meted out to women in social and political domains. They make an effort to look into the deep-rooted subconscious levels, the struggles and conflicts of women in a vivid manner. For the present analysis, Nayantara Sahgal's Rich Like Us, and Margaret Atwood's Surfacing are considered. Sonali in Rich Like Us and an unnamed female lead character in Surfacing stand as manifestation of feminist perspective of the respective authors. Both of them put up with multiple tribulations and emerge self-actualizing in the end.

Keywords: commonwealth, feminine, freedom, identity, perspective, Rose, Sonali, tribulations.

Introduction

The confederation of countries, which attained political independence from the suzerainty of the British, subsequently is termed as 'commonwealth' of nations. The shift in the political mantle has accrued in the swap of culture, civilization and political chrysalis. This phenomenon has paved the way for the generation of distinct literary practices in each of these nations which have come to be acknowledged as commonwealth literature. It caters to reflect a wide range of human experiences, socio-political conditions through literature. The legacy of the English language left by the British has better suited to articulate the intricate socio-cultural, ethno-racial vista of dissent. Thereupon, English is being used as a fitting medium to evince the kaleidoscopic human plight in literature in general and fiction in particular. Exposures to the foreign culture

and the growing perception about nationality have induced awareness through the transit of civilization and socialization.

The dawn of twentieth century has witnessed an array of a myriad of upheavals of all sorts through industrialization, urbanization and deep-rooted rational thinking. According to Chinua Achebe “all art is propaganda, though not all propaganda is art” (as cited in R. K. Dhawan, 1988: 5). The recent tide of impetuosity, spawned in the Commonwealth literature has gathered a greater scrutiny. The literary inputs from the Commonwealth countries are no longer regarded subsidiary. They have proffered considerable and momentous literature to modern English. The genre of novel, though most recent phenomenon, has attained a significant bearing and emanated an effective actuality in the twentieth century. The Indian English novelists have been endeavoring to project India with its multitudinous themes with divergent viewpoints. The salient feature of Canadian Writing in English is the conflux of the British and the American dialects. There are glaring similarities between the Indian and the Canadian literatures. Both bear the traces of identical scholarly travails, cross-cultural, regional multiplicity etc. Since 1960s the women writers, who have ceased to emulate the British literary models, have emerged as a great form of reckoning in literature. The present paper is an attempt to study the feminist perspective in *Rich Like Us* of Nayantara Sahgal, a quintessential political novelist of par excellence in Indian Writing in English and *Surfacing* of Margaret Atwood, a contemporary and towering woman novelist in Canadian literature. Concern of both the novelists is feminism. They try to expose the shabby treatment given to women by the male domineering society.

Rich Like Us

Nayantara Sahgal’s sixth novel *Rich Like Us* (1985) is a singular political novel. The turbulent socio-political circumstances which exuded in the aftermath of the imposition of National Emergency in India by the then Prime Minister, Mrs. Indira Gandhi in 1975, serve as backdrop in the novel. Along with the high-strung political maneuvers in the post-independence times, Sahgal makes a sincere attempt to recapture the impact of the inhuman practice of sati from India’s past in the novel. The novel is the story of Rose, a London Cockney and Sonali, an IAS officer, who are put to suffering and humiliations in the wake of altered political equations during the Emergency. We find the ardent struggle of women for self-expression and self-realization in the novels of Nayantara Sahgal. She vehemently opposes the gender biased discrimination prevalent in contemporary India. She equally attacks the social malaise of making the innocent women vulnerable to the horrendous practice of sati in Indian society. Both Rose and Sonali stand as testimony for Sahgal’s disposition towards the feminist cause. Sahgal intently makes Rose a modern sati to glorify the nobility of women of ancient times. To put it in the words of Harveen Sachdeva Mann, “Sahgal’s engagement with feminist issues, closer scrutiny reveals that the author’s liberal critique of suttee is couched in a nation-based patriarchal language, which in fact marginalizes and oppresses women” (1993: 104). Sahgal has to invent Sonali Ranade to articulate her feminist vista of self-assertion and individuality. Kiranjit Kaur

Bedi observes, “Sonali heroically fights the malice in bureaucratic hierarchy which has seeped to the core and corroded the Indian society and its long-cherished values” (2011: 1).

The novel, at the first front, gives a vivid account of the political autocracy and domination. The innocent public have to experience the inhuman practices forced sterilization camps, censorship, controls on the movements of the citizens, human rights violations etc. The innocent people, the slum dwellers are pulled out of their dens and hurled into mobile vans, a condition no better than stray dogs. The novel begins with an account of the murky business deal in which Devkins, the stepson of Rose and Mr. Neuman, a Western entrepreneur, are partners. The Emergency has catered to protect the privileges of the affluent during that period of the novel. On the easy business agreements and nebulous foreign collaborations, Neuman’s host comments, “This Emergency is what we needed...the way the country’s being run now, with one person giving orders and no one being allowed to make fuss about it” (2014: 2). Ergo, the Emergency is presented as all-pervading and destabilizing all the established systems of economy, political and social establishments etc.

Sonali, the proud invention of its author, is the choicest of the characters of Sahgal. Through the first-person narration of Sonali and the ubiquitous author, the bond between Rose and Sonali, their hardships during the Emergency and its impact on the lives of people socially, economically and politically are revealed. Sonali laments at the attitude and reaction of her colleagues who have been willingly paving the way for family rule. She concludes that the clear demarcating line between politics and services has been obscured abominably in the past. The cynical espousal of the same is thwarting the spirit of democracy dangerously. The snooping of the politicians into the affairs of bureaucracy has reached the state of acceptance badly. The functionaries of position are playing their part in making this fallacious eventuality a reality. Sonali criticizes the people of her own ilk that, “So long as it didn’t touch us, we played along pretending the ‘Empress’ new clothes were beautiful” (2014: 24). Sahgal candidly refers to Indira Gandhi and her son Sanjay Gandhi through Sonali when she reacts in no mincing words about her demotion. Sonali comments, “everything is controlled by one and a half people” (2014: 33). Sahgal observes that Emergency has adversely affected the people of all walks. In her interview with S. Varalakshmi, Sahgal affirms her viewpoint that, “it (Emergency) is a very strong back ground because it then colors the destiny of the characters” (1993: 11).

The character of Rose occupies a central stage in the novel. She meets Mr. Ram L. Surya, a businessman from Lahore, in a chocolate shop in London. Being attracted to Ram who was married by then, Rose comes to India as a second wife “obeying an invisible summons, pulled on strings, she had left her home and country...” (2014: 37). She had to incur the wrath of her parents for breaking her engagement with Freddie and for her choice of becoming a ‘Black’ man’s second wife. Besides, her reception at Ram’s household in India was rather cold. Ram’s father reacted sharply and his anti-British temperament didn’t allow him to accept an English woman s his daughter-in-law. Mona, Ram’s Indian wife, was locked in an undeclared war with

Rose as an “intruder and usurper” (2014: 62). Thus, things didn’t turn out as Rose expected them to be at the time of marriage with Ram. At the beginning of the novel, Rose is seen attending Ram, who is paralyzed and bed ridden with a massive stroke. He could communicate with a mere flicker of eyes. Sahgal comments at this poignant state of communication between Rose and Ram that, “their need was mutual” (2014: 37). At this juncture in life, at the age of sixty-three, Rose’s future is quite uncertain as Ram has never left any deed guaranteeing the means of livelihood for Rose in the eventuality of his demise. On the other, Devkins, who never earns a penny, bids for a partnership in the Happyola Project, which has been started up during the Emergency in collaboration with Neuman. To invest in the venture, Dev forges his father’s signature. Rose has grown apprehensive that Dev is making every kind of tantrum to eliminate his father physically.

The bond of friendship between Rose and Sonali, despite the differences in age, nationality, physical appearances and social backgrounds, is remarkable in the novel. Sonali rightly visualizes the malignant attitude of Dev towards Rose and decides to help Rose legally. The lawyer, whom she approaches for legal assistance in Rose’s case, expresses his inability to take up the case in the light of Dev’s growing influence as the Chairman of New Entrepreneurs. The same lawyer articulates that Madam Prime Minister may be vested with extra-constitutional rights to deal with the disruptive forces ruthlessly. Sonali tries to dissuade Dev from withdrawing his father’s money through forgery. But it becomes futile. With Rose’s insistence for a settlement for Ram’s properties, Dev decides to eliminate Rose physically. On one late night, Rose goes to the tomb in a brooding mind about her bleak future, Dev’s men attack Rose and kill her and throws her corpse in a well nearby. Just like that, Rose meets her abrupt end by becoming a victim to her step son’s malice and greed for money and power. Sonali smells a rat in the whole affair. The bereavement of Rose is a great loss to Sonali. She feels pathetically that murders of Rose would be set free as Dev has been elevated to the rank of a Cabinet Minister in the Government owing to his support to the Emergency and also due to his proximity with Madam’s son. The brutal and scrupulously planned murder of Rose is likened to sati by the critics. The novelist in an interview with S. Varalakshmi observes, “Dev gets rid of her because he does not want her around. She is dangerous to him. So it is almost a worse form of Sati” (1993: 16).

The character of Sonali and her reaction to the Emergency is central to the action in the novel. Sonali, a Joint Secretary in the Ministry of Industries is sorely affected during the Emergency. Her upbringing, her father’s legacy as a civil servant, the training she received have prevailed upon her to turn into an upright and dedicated IAS officer. In her official capacity, she disapproves the much touted Happyola project. She feels, “My training had taught me to review good harmless products with care...” (2014: 25). Sonali condemns the brewing up of the nexus between officials and politicians and acting against the very spirit of democracy. Sonali feels, “We were all taking part in thinly disguised masquerade preparing the stage for family rule” (2014: 23). Sonali is very critical of the role played by Ravi Kachru, her classmate, during the Emergency, “playing politics as if his life depended on it” (2014: 23). As a consequence, she has

been demoted and posted to a place where there is no vacancy to her level in service and Ravi Kachru is elevated to her position. Sonali condemns the ‘bogus emergency’ and denounces the dealings between the bureaucrats and politicians. Her stern opposition and her unbending attitude are revealed through her resignation to her cadre as an IAS officer. After resigning to service, Sonali concentrates her focus on the study of India’s hoary culture and history.

Surfacing

In Margaret Atwood’s second novel *Surfacing* (1972) the female lead character is left anonymous without revealing her name. The plot of the novel suggests symbolically that this unnamed narrator goes deep into the lake of life and understands the immoral nature of the things she has committed in life and rises up from depths of deception. The novel exposes the dubious and devious position accorded to women in the social set up which is imposed strictly on women in the male chauvinistic patriarchal society. Most of the women writers in the contemporary times raise voice against the socio-cultural unfair treatment meted out to women. Withal, Atwood’s characters are shown to struggle with the same banal issues which deny them of their basic right of being human with freedom of action. *Surfacing* dovetails the fundamental dissimilarities intrinsically among the human beings. At the very outset of the novel, Atwood presents the nameless female character as a foundling protagonist. The story is narrated in the first person by her. The action in the novel unfolds with the narrator relinquishing her active life and her not so good past and the society occupied by the people who are lovelorn, mechanical, and materialistic. The novel begins with the narrator’s tour to the cottage, where she spent her childhood, in search of her missing father. In this novel, Atwood endorses the eco feminism. The author tries to suggest that both women and nature are exploited and susceptible to innumerable afflictions in the patriarchal society. The protagonist goes to the northern Quebec in search of her missing father. Outwardly, her journey to the woods suggests her pursuit to establish connection between her past and present with the expectation that it would salvage her from her insidious life. However, it indicates the pilgrimage of a shattered individual seeking solace and attempts to escape from her bleak present and her exertion for riddance and her struggle to find her own selfhood.

The narrator, in her search for her missing father, is accompanied by a couple, Anna and David; and Joe, the lover of the narrator. She has been cohabitating and sharing bed and board with Joe. The narrator is shocked to find her father’s cabin which has been impaired due to the cultural invasion of North America. She censures it as a disease spreading its ugly tentacles all around. She laments at the onslaught of the tide of developments which are debilitating the past. The narrator’s emotional disorder, which has emanated from the collapse of her marriage, the loss of a child and her subsequent divorce, is further aggravated with her visit to the shack where she spent her childhood. She wants to part from her unpleasant past by visiting her father’s place. But the reversal of it takes place. Her own homeland appears as an unfamiliar place and everything seems altered. She feels, “I feel deprived of something as though I can’t really get here unless I’ve suffered” (1972: 16). She comes to know from Paul, her father’s friend, that her

father has left everyone and everything without telling anyone. When Paul and his wife enquire about her husband and son, she wants to reveal that they have separated and her son is left with her husband. Her leaving her son with her ex-husband is an imperious sin. The narrator feels guilty to have acceded to kill her unborn baby through abortion as her former husband doesn't want her to beget a child by him as their relationship is unofficial. She avers, "I could have said No, but I didn't, that made me one of them too, a killer" (1972: 168).

Atwood makes a candid attempt to show how shallow and mechanical are the relationships between men and women. The relationship between Anna and David; the narrator and Joe are casual and modern. David and Anna who are married for nine years seem to be 'perfect couple' to the narrator in the beginning. But to her great awe, Anna comments about her marriage that "It was more like jumping off a cliff" (1972: 53). The narrator is dismayed to know that they are just pretentious and disloyal to each other. The narrator understands that Anna is a stooge of her social presumption which subscribes to the conventional image of a woman. Both Anna and the narrator are typical of the fake contemporary world with their instinctive and routine vibes. The relationship between the protagonist and Joe makes sense as Joe is not impulsive and still retains the ability to feel. The narrator's search for her missing father is motivated by the narrator's impulse to understand the intuition behind her father's vanishing from the cabin. It is no surprise for the protagonist since she knows that her father loves solitude and eventually, he could have chosen the northern island as a safe haven. Over her search, the narrator finds a long-billed heron, hanging upside down over a tree branch. The narrator identifies herself as helpless as the dead heron. When Joe proposes to the narrator, she refuses since both of them have been living together already. Moreover, the bitter experiences of her past marriage have rendered her skeptic of such words as 'love' and 'marriage' and she reiterates, "I'll never trust that word again" (1972: 53). When Joe expresses his grief, the narrator understands that Joe really doesn't really love her, but he feels he does. The human emotion of love doesn't make sense to the narrator as many terms have many alternatives and 'love is like any other, she feels.

After her futile attempt to locate her father, following the instructions found in the rock paintings, the narrator makes up her mind to look for him in the lake. When she plunges deep into the lake, she finds the dead body of her father. The corpse of her father creates awareness in the protagonist to merge body and mind to become conscious of the truth. Till then, she has been leading a life of deception. Her marriage, her divorce, her lost child, her affair with a married man who coerces her for abortion, reminds her of true state of her being. Since then, she feels guilty of carrying the sin of killing her unborn child. There upon her father's death has served her as a gift of integrating her body and mind and she comes out of her frozen attitude towards life, love and marriage. Her mother's scrapbook drives a message into her soul that "everything is alive; everything is waiting to become alive" (1972: 182). Her guilty consciousness about her abortion prevails upon her to get impregnated again, "I can feel my lost child surfacing within me, forgiving me, raising me from the lake" (1972: 187).

The following day, the protagonist hides from her three companions during the time of leaving the lake. She wants to stay all alone and whole. So, she takes off her clothes and subsists by eating only raw vegetables. Thus, her identification with the nature is total. This move of the protagonist symbolizes her free will and her strong impulse to liberate herself from every kind of shackle and she leaves her spurious body to lie on the surface of the lake, “When I am clean, I come up out of the lake, leaving my false body floated on the surface” (1972: 206). As of, the narrator begins to identify herself with every kind of object in the woods. The end of the novel leaves the readers puzzled as no concrete conclusion is offered. Some critics argue that ending of the novel denotes the self-assertion of the protagonist as she doesn’t want to turn into a victim again to the male domination. After diving into the lake, she envisions the actuality and emerges purified enough to face the society confidently. The novel ends on an optimistic note as the protagonist wants to sever all her imperfect relations in which she has been hitherto indulged. The new found confidence and her realization thereof forge an integral being of herself. Responding to this change, J. Esther Margaret and K. Ravindran comment, “Isolation gives her the realization that she could meet life’s challenges as a “new woman” (2017: 48). Commenting on the same aspect, Ambika Bhalla says, “She wants to transform nonviolently the structure of male dominance and restore a kind of balance and harmony between women and men” (2012: 6).

Conclusion

Thus, Sahgal’s protagonist Sonali in *Rich Like Us* is depicted as an embodiment of feminine consciousness in the midst of the prevailing political and historical context in India during the times of the national Emergency. The novel stands as a critique of the patriarchal structures, political totalitarianism and the socio-economic discriminations that affect women. The female characters such Rose, Sonali and Mona are shown as grappling with their respective positions within politically and socially fraudulent systems. On the other hand, *Surfacing* is about a woman’s search for identity and a derision of the false marriage system. The unnamed protagonist’s option not to undergo abortion again reveals her feminist attitude. Her story symbolizes her self-esteem through her attunement with nature, and her conflict and opposition the patriarchal and societal norms. It is salvaging her body and mind from the male-chauvinistic social structures. In turn, it seems to be the extension of the attitude of Atwood. In *Nayantara* Sahgal’s *Rich Like Us*, Sonali stands as an embodiment of veritable feminist perspective. Despite her humiliation by way of demotion, Sonali asserts her individuality and her ardent zeal for life through her resolution to direct her attention to study India’s hoary past and culture. Thus, *Nayantara* Sahgal and Margaret Atwood are considered as the foremost feminist writers in contemporary times.

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