SELF IDENTITY AND LIBERATION BY REPLACING THE TRADITIONAL IMAGE OF INDIAN WOMAN: A COMPARATIVE STUDY ON NAYANTARASAHGAL’S “THIS TIME OF MORNING” AND SHOBHA DE’S “SOCIALITE EVENING”

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ABSTRACT

The present paper is a comparative study between Nayantara Sahgal and Shobha De regarding the exploration of self-identity, seeking liberation in all walks of life, replacing the traditional image of Indian woman. The similarities between the two novelists have been brought forth related to individuality of women and their struggle for identity. Both expressed the view that women in the present society still are suppressed by the patriarchal society. Shobha De stresses on the modernity 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 unique expressions.

Keywords: individuality, modernity, comparative study, suppression and patriarchal society.

Woman plays a crucial role in the life of every one. She proves to be a constant source of interest and inspiration for the development of individual. Modern women are different from other women in many aspects of thought and practice. There is a lot of change in appearance, articulation and discovered 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 Shobha De have dared to in highlighting the individuality and gender identity. Both of their writings display the anxiety for upliftment of human values by stressing women identity and their freedom. While exploring various ways of identity and freedom they never try to interrupt the contemporary social setup.

New women in the novels of post-independence women novelists have great insight and understanding the dilemma which is faced by women in a traditional society where dual morality is the accepted norm. Self-willed and individualistic women face suffering caused by broken relationships. The new women long for liberty and want a new social order where they can be what they want to be, where there is no need for hypocrisy, and where character is judged by the purity of the heart and not by the chastity of the body. Almost all their novels portray women who embrace this new concept of modernity.

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 all novels about the major concept of her writing is to liberate women from the suppression. Her women are liberal and unconventional. Shobha De is tireless and unhindered in depicting the lifestyles of the rich
aristocratsocietyin general and the women in particular. She is frank and blunt in her presentations. Her women, no longer, submit to the age-old traditional values and social practices.

They present the woman’s challenge to the patriarchal society, that is, women are no longer doormats to be trod upon and dirtied. Their women, no longer, submit to the age-old traditional values and social practices. They are frank and blunt in their presentations. Both of them have brought out the quite different characters and values of new woman whom they ceaselessly portray in almost all their novels. Their women are highly individualistic, calculative and self-centred. They have extreme independence and recklessness. They present in a realistic way and do not care for poetic or decorative description. They write freely and deals with man and woman relations in a very open manner. Theynever hesitate in sexually explicit words without any fear of disapproval from the average conservative Indian public.

In This Time of Morning, there is a tale of broken marriage, love and the role of culture standing against the freedom of women and the conflict between conservatism and liberal outlook dramatised in Mr. Narang’s family and Kailas’s family against the backdrop of the conflict between Gandhian values represented by Kalyan. Sahgal presents in this novel, three types of women – a tradition-bound woman, Mira, the emerging new women in Nita and Rashmi, and a rebellious woman, Uma Mitra.

Sahgal portrays some fractured couple in this novel. They are Saleem and Saira, Kalyan Sinha and then Nita, who dreads the shadow of marriage, has taken a fancy for Kalyan. Neil Berensen, the architect of the Peace Institute is a freewheeling philanderer with his family away in Norway. He has an affair with Rashmi. Rashmi finds no harm in extra-marital relationships. Then there is Leela who has taken to life in America, at first with the flutter of a bird just uncaged, and later, with a soaring delight in every aspect of her new found freedom. But she fails to discard her upbringing and commits suicide when she becomes pregnant. Another unhappy couple is that of Arjun Mitra and his wife, Uma.

NayantaraSahgal believes that the polarities in man-woman relationships should be broken down to bring about absolute human freedom. Her women characters transgress the social norms that fetter them. From being curbed, controlled, directed and denied of their individuality, they rise to realize their own worth and question the ‘naturalness’ of certain social actions. The novelist frees them from prescribed gender roles and redeems them from controlling logos. NayantaraSahgal’s women characters belong to a higher social, economic, professional and cultural group. Her novels revolve around their sense of individuality, discontentment, frustrations and difficulty in adjustment. Sahgal’s idea of freedom extends to freedom of expression, freedom in choosing her husband, freedom in sharing her thoughts with a man without any reserve, and freedom practically in everything. Her characters strive to create openness between their inner selves and their environment and uphold with dignity, a new outlook on life. The institution of marriage is subjected to a very close scrutiny. The novelist shows how women relate to it, react to it and subvert it.

Mira in the novel, considers marriage sacred. Her daughter Rashmi’s announcement that her marital life is a fiasco is a moral blow to her. She is unable to understand Rashmi’s problems in coping with her marriage. Mira wonders:

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 lunatics and lepers. And Dalip, God forbid, was none of these things. Fulfilment had lain in service and sacrifice. If there was suffering, too, it was part of life. (TTM 152-53)

According to Mira, Rashmi’s frustration is a “tasteless parody of a transplanted modernity” (TTM 153). “Maintaining an outward harmony” might sound foolish and bereft of emotional honesty for Rashmi but for Mira it ensures “the rhythm of the entire household” and shows the enormous strength of a woman when she sacrifice her personal desires. Even though with time she makes a painful “discovery that there was a Kailas she would never know” (TTM 46), Mira makes a success of her marriage. She has always believed that there are some people who needed looking after and others who can look after themselves. She decides to look after him, stays by him and shares his ideals and concerns.

She is happy to be her husband’s shadow as well as his strength. At times one finds her crying herself to sleep rather than confront her husband. She cannot dream of any encounter that might produce unhappiness to them. Happiness, according to her, has to be earned. She considers it a “hard grindstone of duty.” She is a part of the
“fast-disappearing race of women for whom endurance was a test of character” (TTM 153). Mira who believes that her husband is everything to her finds her daughter Rashmi’s decision to separate from her husband one of “extreme modernism with unholy haste.” She is sober and lives by tradition but her daughter seems too modern for her taste.

Rashmi in This Time of Morning is Nayantara Sahgal’s first woman character who walks out of an unsuccessful marriage. She is full of its bitter memories. Her relationship with her husband has been a “deadening trauma.” All that she seeks in her marriage is a complete surrender of body, mind and soul holding back nothing in reserve and at the same time expecting reciprocation. Her family does not understand the suffocation she experiences with Dalip. Only Rakesh, her friend notices that marriage has made her subdued, pale and dispirited. She is unable to participate wholeheartedly in any activity. The broken marriage has left hurt feelings that make her withdraw from life. She finds solace not from Rakesh, her one-time-lover but from a total stranger, Neil Berensen.

Communication is easy with Neil and it awakens Rashmi’s desire too. Sexual communication is easy and natural with him. However, this relationship comes to an abrupt end because she suddenly realizes the ‘piecemeal,’ a superficial relationship with him. She tells Neil: “Me without any past or future, just me lying here on this grass. That’s not me, Neil ...... We have to invade each other’s privacy a little, force things a little, or we shall stay just where we are” (TTM 163). Without ‘invasion,’ Rashmi feels that enduring relationship is not possible with anyone. There is a need within Rashmi to possess Neil Berensen totally and entirely and wants their relationship to be much more than a mere physical one.

The women in This Time of Morning are more varied in their search for freedom and equality. Uma and Leela, in their reckless search for freedom, use men as tools, but succeed only in harming themselves. Celia, Barbara and Nita, in their ultimate dependence on Kalyan betray the failure of their search for identity. In the character of Nita, Sahgal explores the place of a woman in Indian society before marriage. Nita is the young, beautiful daughter of Dr. Narang, who is a queer blend of Eastern and Western culture. Nita’s parents want to settle down their daughter in marriage. They do not give any importance to the wishes of her daughter and force her to marry the man of their choice whom she neither loves nor admires. Finally, she agrees to her parents’ choice of Vijay as groom. Though she is aware that Vijay views her as a possession not as an individual, and this kind of marriage has no prospects of fulfillment. Nita desires to live her own life and discover the needs of her body, rejecting the values and ideas of the previous generation thrust upon her. She offers herself to the irresistible Kalyan, the man of her choice. Nita’s pre-marital relationship with Kalyan is the result of an attempt to fulfill her inner desire for love and communication. When the time comes to decide about her marriage, her parents decide her future. Through the character of Nita, Sahgal shows the conventional narrow-minded Indian society, where life-partners are chosen by the parents.

Shobha De strikes the latest trend in her feminist stance. Through her novels she tries to shatter the unsympathetic and uncivilized attitude of callousness and indifference of men towards women. Her women characters are masters of their own lives. They are not of soft and weak natures who are terrified under the power of male society. They belong to rich aristocratic society of Mumbai. They are independent, confident and assertive. They form that class of women who are trendsetters. The future generations of women will follow their footsteps and look at them as pioneers. Life-style of new women is very intriguing and tempting to any middle class educated urban woman. She is a free individual and is adorned in a different way with ideas and values. She is not only a playing in the hands of her male counter. She is tough competitor and equal partner in any enterprise. The new women are not husband worshippers. They consider them as their friends. They consider that life is a challenge. In her non-fictional work Shobha De observes:

“Eventually, every relationship is a power struggle either on an overt or subliminal level Control over the situation has been a male prerogative over the centuries. Women’s destinies have been determined largely in that context alone It is time they were made aware of their own potential and power. The very concept of sexes locked in eternal battle is negativeand destructive. The destructive avatar is as potent as the creative one. It is in maintaining the state of equilibrium between these two opposing forces that leads to creative and dynamic harmony

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Men will have to come to terms with women power”, (STH 1996:111)

Shobha De’s women characters also belong to the new society of rich families. They are a new breed of women who live life on their own terms. For instance, an image of the new woman is thus presented by Shobha De: “The scene was changing, even in Bombay. Women worked, women married, women divorced and women remained single.” (SE 1989:44) They want that men should follow them like dogs. These women drive the trendiest cars. They go to expensive hotels to wine and dine. They prefer shopping outside their own country and travel abroad. They go to the finest tourist resorts to spend the summer. These women do not have any fixed time for returning home like their traditional counterparts who do not move out of their houses except for marketing or going to temple or to their office if they happen to be working women. Even their morals are questionable and often they have thrown chastity out of their windows and share beds with a chain of lovers. Shobha De has shown all these women in her novels.

Shobha De’s ‘Socialite Evening’ tells us the journey of women along with the other women characters, finding their identity. In this novel she portrays the women characters who live a life of fun, enjoyment and self-indulgence regardless of the pain and unhappiness that they are bound to come by having led such reckless lives. All they care about is their status and wealth. In this novel the women characters are non-conformists. Anjali and Karuna are women who have left their conventional Indian middle class homes in search of freedom—a freedom which is not bound by any rule, a freedom unlimited and overflowing. They are ambitious and daring. They marry for convenience and are little bothered about what type of person their men will turn out to be in the long run or how long their marital connections even when their marriages are intact.

Anjali is a modern girl who has married Abe because he is a rich man and spends a lot of money on her and thus she leads a life of luxury. She knows beforehand that Abe is not a man of good character. He has sexual relations with a number of women, but in spite of all this she agrees to marry him only to enjoy his wealth. On the other hand, she has no objection in his extra-marital connections and she is unhindered in his wild reputed relations with women. She thinks that her husband is the golden egg laying goose. She also procures young virgins for him for his satisfaction. Her main aim is only to make him happy by hook or crook. She has no jealousy when he takes a new girl to bed. It was only a routine work for her. In a beach party Abe openly shows off his dirty carnal habit:

_The bhang was working its dangerous magic on everyone. Abe and the woman start to lurch drunkenly across a narrow retaining wall along the edge of the property. He was yelling, ’why don’t you remove your top and I take off my bottom and we become one’?_ (SE 1989:48)

Anjali also is a romantic girl and feels no scruples in fixing up extra marital connections. She has her own set of lovers like her husband. She is equally reckless in her sexual behaviour. She develops illicit relationship even with a very young boy who, age-wise, could well be her son but the affair ends in a disaster. She picks up another affair, this time with a Frenchman this too ends disastrously. She marries Kumar, a gay who has plenty of money. Life to Anjali means only men and money. Her marriage with Kumar is also only for wealth and social standing. Her marriage with Kumar was not satisfactory for her and she opts for a divorce.

The second woman character Karuna as well as other women in the novel feel the same way:

_We treated marriage like a skin allergy- an irritant all right, but not something that would incapacitate us. We had our own secret lives- and by that I do not mean clandestine affairs. But these are our private words; inaccessible to the men we had married. I could spend hours in this world, even when the husband was around talking to me. There was thrill in switching off and pretending to be there listening while being lost in a universe created by me, for myself.(SE 1989:68)_

Karuna like Anjali has no faith in the purity of material life though she comes out of her strictly traditional, middle class home, yet she wants to lead a luxurious life as the women of aristocratic families. She is very much attracted by shunned world of modelling against the wishes of her father. With Anjali as her mentor she plunges
into the wild glossy world of an upper social circle in Mumbai. Like Anjali, Karuna too marries for money. But her dreams are tarnished because her husband turns out to be a typical Indian male who has little consideration for the wishes of his wife. She is not satisfied with her husband who turns out to be a typical Indian male. Karuna is frustrated in legal as well as emotional feelings. In desperation Karuna picks up her husband’s friend Krish to satisfy her sexual urges. She openly visits Venice with Krish. Her husband does not tolerate it and there is a big gap in between the husband and wife. At last she gets divorce from her husband and leads a free life. She takes up a career in advertising.

Karuna succeeds in carving out a niche for herself in this competitive world. She becomes financially independent and this becomes her extra asset to flirt unlimited. She plays different roles at different times to quench her emotional and psychic thirst. She is a model, a housewife, a society lady and an actor-writer and a paramour. For De, marriage subjugates and enslaves women. It leads her to aimless days indefinitely repeated, life that slip away gently towards death without questioning its purpose. But not so with the new women like Karuna, she has independent thoughts. She does not tolerate the supreme position on her thoughts by anybody. She unveils and unfurls herself to activate the creative urge stifled within her and this act of unburdening herself is a compromise with herself.

Shobha De’s novels represent the new Indian woman’s voice. A ‘New woman’ is in search of self-identity, seeking liberation in all walks of life, replacing the traditional image of Indian woman. The need for women to seek their identity is the message in her novels. However, De also exposes the women’s misunderstanding regarding their freedom and mocks at their way of asserting their individuality by posing to be men without concentrating on female empowerment as a whole. Her women protagonists fail to understand that their sexual freedom is being used and abused by men. She also suggests that, whenever women, whether circumstantially or ambitiously disregard morality, they cannot escape disaster and consequent suffering. Though De has presented women who indulge in free sex, live fashionable and wealthy life, she in no way seems to support the way of life adopted by these so called modern women. On the opposing, she shows her contempt and dislike for their unethical and socially unacceptable behaviour. This can be presumed from the ultimate fate her heroines are destined to as a result of their immoderation in bizarre activities and abnormal behaviour. In fact, Shobha De advises her women to analyze their behaviour and stop posing to be men. Finally, though her novels are criticized for pornographic element, De is definitely a writer with a purpose. One cannot ignore her because she is the celebrity writer and has contributed in her own distinct way to Indian Novel in English. In the present scenario of gender discrimination, a study of these novels helps to widen and direct our thoughts to relevant problems affecting women in Indian society.

The novelists are of the opinion that of equivalence of power between men and women is a necessary need for a healthy society. So in their novelstheir women characters do not accept any male interference in their affairs. Shobha De is shocked to see that tradition has a very big hold over the Indian society and even a stronger hold over its women folk. Moreover, the society is basically a Hindu society where women are given a status lower than that of men. Traditional rules and norms bind the Indian women in nearly every quarter. They are the preserver of the family and make all kind of sacrifice for its welfare.

Shobha De has seen a number of social evils infested the Indian society in the last many centuries. Right from her childhood the girls are taught that their main duty is to obey the male persons of the family and after the death of the husband they have to go on the funeral pyre as sati. It was a crude custom which was given the form of Pativrata Dharma. The male society used to give the reasons for it which was very strange to understand. It was thought that if the widow happens to be young she might be a slur on the family by her undesirable conduct. Moreover, people generally thought that, as long as she lived she would be a burden on the family. Even very recently, in the later part of the twentieth century, a sati case in Rajasthan shook the entire country. The burning of RoopKunwar, a young bride, on the funeral pyre of her husband, only shows how orthodox our society is even when science has proved a number of such age-old beliefs to be useless and harmful to the society.

Indian traditional women are in general adjustable accommodative, pliable and service-minded. They serve their families unquestionably. On the other hand, the women do not find any sense in being acquiescent. But the new women are not ready to suffer and sacrifice as the traditional Indian women do. They want to project their image as an individual, free from all kinds of conservative thinking which they seek to overthrow. They are ready to fight their way against all odds encountering in their way in fulfilling their aspirations. The new women do not blindly follow the old rotten traditions. They rebel against them. They challenge the unhealthy traditions. Nayantara Sahgal has portrayed such type of women characters in her novels. Women who use modernity as a
license for licentiousness can also be seen in her novels. Shobha De’s women are those who form a new and highly intriguing group. They are daring, educated, unconventional, shrewd, rich and self-absorbing with loose morals.

Shobha De has portrayed the new women who are hyper modern and do not want to live under the subjugation of men. They even are not ready to be equal to them; rather they want to be more important than in the society. They consider men only a means to get to their desired ends. Unlike the traditional women who worship their men as their lords and masters, these new women drink, attend late night parties like men and refuse to remain at their mercy, rather they are out to teach men a lesson. The new women have turned the table upside down.

Thus the paper reveals the contemporary study on tradition, modernity and the concept of new women in terms of individual freedom and gender identity in the select novels of Nayantara Sahgal and Shobha De. 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. De 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 Rashmi, Uma Mitra, Anjali or Karuna whoever the character may be, their final objective is to have their own freedom and identity.

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