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NAYANTARA'S A SITUATION IN NEW DELHI A SAGA OF TRAUMA, TRAVAILS AND  
TRIUMPH

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ABSTRACT

Nayantara's novel *A Situation in New Delhi (ASND)* deals with a woman's predicament in the context of a purely man-made situation to the degrees that the only sane response to face the menace of the oppressive forces in the society is death or be a rebel. Nayantara's fictional women thus uphold the need to be granted the right to choose; their life is governed by their choice instead of the patriarchal norms. Though feminist in her approach she does not subscribe to militant feminism which believes in the overthrow not of suppressive forces but of the society itself. Thematically the novel is concerned with the meaning of revolution and the ways of creating self-awareness both individual and society level. The novelist shows the evil-consequences of such demoniacal and monstrous play of sex-maniacs on a woman who is driven to insanity and self-destruction.

Nayantara Sahgal is a prominent Indian English novelist who stands with women's sexuality and her right to body in both unconventional and subversive manner. She displays a highly developed consciousness of the gendered nature of morality and social structure. Nayantara tries to depict women sufferings due to sexist bias in patriarchal society and envisions a world based on equality and harmony between the two sexes. She examines the sufferings and problem of women who feel completely entrapped in both status either being single or married because even being married is neither a system of slavery nor an escape route. Nayantara's women character stand at crossroads of life and feels outraged that men treat women as possession who belong to them by contrast or by blood.

Nayantara's novel *A Situation in New Delhi (ASND)* deals with a woman's predicament in the context of a purely man-made situation to the degrees that the only sane response to face the menace of the oppressive forces in the society is death or be a rebel (demolishing the old ideals for creating a world of her own to live by). The ambiguous moral standards which so easily condone man's primitivistic tendencies and moral depravity inflict medievalistic human torture on the woman in such an arbitrary manner that human imagination shudders at it. The society created in *ASND* is one which fails to protect women even in the capital of the country. The boys who raped Madhu (a student of Delhi University) obviously regard her only as an object of lust; to be used at their disposal and have no regards to her feelings and self-respect. Nayantara in the novel has phenomenally depicts the inner trauma of Madhu, symbolising the Indian women who are after seventy years to independence are exposed to various social, political and cultural changes. Keeping this M.N. Shane has remarked: "*The loss of the understanding of the nature of man, according to Mrs. Sahgal is a major source of human sickness.*" (Shane: 1995: 206)

Madhu who ironically becomes untouchable in the society for no fault of her own, is a helpless victim of man's beastly sexuality. The callousness and apathy of the parents ultimately make her ordeal grimmer in that they instead of accepting the facts of social reality get loaded with the nasty thought of throwing her out as soon as possible in marriage to escape the moral denunciation in the neighbourhood. Thematically the novel is concerned with the meaning of revolution and the ways of creating self-awareness both individual and society level. The novelist shows the evil-consequences of such demoniacal and monstrous play of sex-maniacs on a woman who is driven to insanity and self-destruction. Madhu, after receiving a cryptic message goes to meet the Registrar where one among three young men thrust in the room and hit her head against the corner of a table. The injury makes her unconscious, froth rises to her lips but she is gagged to satisfy the animal passion. The spell of hallucinatory fears Madhu, victim of gang-rape continues to stun her sensibility and her cries disturb the silence of the hospital. A nurse puts her hand on her mouth to stop her painful crying which is symbolic of the authoritarian forces in a male-dominated social set-up to put a stop to the crying of their innocent victims. She scolds: *"You're disturbing the whole ward. What are you shouting about?? It's finished."* (ASND: 30)

The nurse seems to be conversant with the ways of the world in which a woman's predicament is confined to silent endurance of the wounds of suffering because her cries would ironically draw attention of the outer world, curiously waiting in a corner to put a token of shame on her like Hawthorne's heroine. The suggestion is fraught with implicit wisdom to impress upon Madhu's mind that is a male-centred world; a woman's identity is reduced to be an easy victim of man's exploitative measures. Her predicament is to live and die alone unnoticed for the want of awareness which is needed to fight out the forces of exploitation and servitude. Later we find that Madhu is discharged from the hospital to enter into a world where she would have to face the most agonizing and nerve-wrecking query like---- if she is a maiden or maiden no more after the loss of her virginity. Her predicament is reminiscent of Tess who was abandoned by her husband when she was found morally infected by dubious moral standards of Victorian society. Madhu as a victim of human lust needs encouragement, care and love so as to restore her lost faith in man's sub-angelic nature but on the contrary she is taken as a burden on the family.

The novels of Nayantara are a microcosm of life itself, the life which she keenly perceived around her. ASND is a disturbingly realistic picture of Post Independence India. Nayantara's fictional women thus uphold the need to be granted the right to choose; their life is governed by their choice instead of the patriarchal norms. Though feminist in her approach she does not subscribe to militant feminism which believes in the overthrow not of suppressive forces but of the society itself. *"Sahgal's women refuse to fit into the mould of the 'perfect lady'; but their revolt is more cathartic than defeatist. Instead of seeking to burn the social order her women strive to carve a niche, a respectable and equal place for them within the social order."* (Asha Choubey: 2002: 23)

Madhu's parents fear social stigma and thus want to marry her off at an earliest. But she has undergone the process of self-awareness; she has begun to understand the place of male in a male-dominated social structure and therefore resolves within self not to marry at all. The novelist tells that Madhu pleads to be left alone but the family turn indifferent to her supplications and sobbing. Nayantara an outstanding Indian English writer articulates her deep concern over gender-oppression in her world. Her all characters are shaped after the Indian personality structure which is extremely complex and has eluded all categorization until it has been studied from the psychoanalytic angle. She delineates with keen perception and sensitivity the problems and the sufferings of women in marriage who feel entrapped, oppressed and doomed. Some of her women characters go out in search of their freedom while some accept their fate unhesitatingly. Her women characters shield themselves with their virtuousness and courage to take risks of the unknown. At times she comes as a champion of individual freedom with a penchant for the feminist cause.

Nayantara employs the technique of contrast to explode the popular myth that if a woman willingly accepts the traditional role of a wife or a mother in a marriage-oriented social structure, she can live a happy life and above all her marriage can be enduring. As a matter of fact marriage is a sacred bond to humanizing the brute in man but it equally creates opportunities for women to live a fuller life of love, companionship, nobler aspirations and cherished dreams provided it rests on certain positive factors which make it a

meaningful alliance. For want of social awareness, moral awakening, courage and strength the woman despite her inheritance of fortune and beatitudes can be easily trapped into a despicable dragnet of male exploitation.

The fact is illustrated by young women in Nayantara's novelistic world who are the helpless victims of the social institutions and organizations find no sympathy from their tormentors; their ordeal become all the more alarming when it is discovered that a saint turns demon dramatically any time to devour their identity and later subjugate them to moral scrutiny. A twenty years old Pinky, the daughter of the Puris, an affluent but otherwise a traditionalist family is one such case to serve a contrast to Madhu's tragedy. She is a victim of early marriage; she is a student of the final year of the graduation course at a college. She is a product of such a cultural set of values and social conventions which still consider the birth of a daughter as something unfortunate and therefore the sanest course is to dispatch her to known/unknown hands at an earliest. But the apparent drawback of this attitude of tying a woman into marriage is to keep her away from the outer influences and the changing times with which she fails to keep pace her very identity will become extinct. Besides, the world of male-chauvinism projects such an enchanting picture of marriage that the innocent girls like Pinky become its willing victims. She is over enthusiastic about the rainbow-world of marriage and religiously consent to act according to the will of their parents without even bringing her own individuality into frame. The marriage is arranged in such a subtle manner so as to give the impression to the outer world that the man to marry Pinky in her own choice: *"Did she choose him herself?" "Yes, of course. As soon as we heard about him we arranged a meeting. And then we asked Pinky how she liked him. We put it to her frankly like that. And she gave her consent."*(ASND: 41)

Pinky's choice as it is asserted has social sanction and carries weight but the text shows otherwise the reactions of a number of characters do not tally the facts. Rishad the only son of Devi for example voices the novelist's view in regard to Pinky's engagement and marriage with pity and disgust that she was not allowed to put her nose out of the house without her mother's permission. And the person to marry her is also the victim of parental authority because he also had no freedom to put his nose out of the home-his mental nose anyway. Pinky represents the image of an ideal woman who is highly conscious of her looks and thus visits beauty parlours in the top-rank hotel of the city to groom her looks: *"She had gone that morning to the Ashoka to get her arms and legs done, leaving her shin with a polished look, not a hair in sight."* She is not conscious of the irony involved in such immature and over enthusiastic evaluation of married life. It is impressed upon her mind that marriage is the ultimate destiny of a woman and thus her studies are discontinued on the plea that the educational institutions are not safe places for the girls students in the wake of incidents such as rape, ugly demonstrations and hooliganism.

A trenchant defender of human values Nayantara pleads for enduring comradeship and friendly communication with a compassionate approach in order to untangle the personal and social problems more particularly the relationship of man-woman. Nayantara represents women's experience and positions in a way that until now they have been under-represented obliterated and colonised by misogyny. She is always in the company of brooding, contemplating, longing or regretting characters who seldom go beyond reminiscing, understanding or misunderstanding. No sooner are we introduced to a character than it slips into its own inner depths. K. Meerabhai remarks: *"If traditional women who still retain their individuality make their appearance in the novels of Kamala Marandaya, women who face challenges in their quest for self-fulfilment are seen in the novels of Nayanatara Sahgal. Likewise women who opt for modernity for convenience and not out of conviction are presented by Ruth Prawar Jhabvala. Women who use modernity as a licence for licentiousness too can be seen in these novels."* (Meerabhai: 1991: 40)

Nadira who has never shown even one single symptom of frailty has to undergo torments defencelessly. She has been wronged by her husband Usman Ali who was is in love with other woman Devi. Nadira is faithful to her husband in spite of the fact that he married late as a result of which there is a wide gap between their ages. Nadira like Leela and Uma is a victim of double standards of man's moral code and thus Usman and Nadira relationship has an echo of the relationship of Vishal Dubey and Leela in Storm in Chandigarh and Anju Mitra and Uma in This Time of Morning which destroys the essence of marital fidelity are the hedonistic sexual escapades to which man turn feverishly for seeking emotional satisfaction knowing like that the spell is fleeting not enduring. In spite of the considerable gap of age between Usman and Nadira and

the warning of the risk involved in such marriages of desperate temperaments, Usman marries Nadira and the novelist tells that the marriage sustained because Usman had a quality that made woman cling. Unlike Uma and Leela, Nadira is a woman of difference, she is beautiful and her voluptuousness speaks of her concern with the physical side of marriage which unconsciously creates an emotional vacuum in Usman's life that needs communication and companionship at the level of intellect and emotions.

The foregoing analyses of the novels of Nayantara Sahgal amply substantiate the view that the novelist indicates the evil of patriarchy and the resultant exploitation of women as a class in relation to the forces which have been alive in the past since the Pre-Vedic society to devour the essence of a woman's individuality. Sehgal's female characters are grouped in two major categories: women who happily bow to the confines of Hindu orthodoxy such as Meera Govind Narain's mother, Devika, Girish's wife and Pinky for whom the husband is God and a slight act of disobedience will incur the sin of purgatorial flames. But their actions are never approved of by their creators as a life of blind allegiance and servitude. Rather the novelist has her sympathy for the women characters of the second category who after a momentary vacillation to articulate their grievances against male chauvinism. They gradually develop a reintegrating vision and come to terms with the conditions of living as created by the forces of gender discrimination in a sexist society. Their struggle against the forces of history and socio-cultural organizations and religious institutions no doubt is tantamount to defiance of the traditional norms of morality in marriage but their stance of inertness nihilism would also not liberate them from the shackles of male-hegemony and oppression. Saroj, Pixie, Simrit and the Mother represent this class: Saroj leaves her faithful husband, Inder when he continues to harass for her having lost purity before marriage but he never talks of robustly collecting sex experiences where he found it, with a plea that is patriarchy moral condemnation is male-prerogative. The rebel in Saroj finds its culmination in Simrit who seeks divorce from Som Raman, a damned good husband caught up in a spiralling mania for affluence. But perhaps he is not aware of the real horror of its impact on conjugal prospectus. Simrit's remarriage with Raj affirms the novelist's belief in the value of marriage provided it is taken in real spirit and there are right ingredients.

Nayantara reveals the need for a new morality in which a woman is treated as man's equal and wants the relationship to be cemented with mutual trust, love and understanding. Her novels reveal the pain, traumas and struggle of beautiful daring women trapped under the brutal diverse settlement with threshold of a new love. Devi in *ASND* is an exception not only amongst Nayantara's women but also majority of women around us in India. Here is a woman who has not only an imposing personality but being a minister she also has an unyielding authority. Devi, Shivraj's widowed sister is taken into the cabinet as the Union Minister of Education as a gesture of respect in the emotional aftermath of his death. The visit of Devi to console the victim party Madhu symbolically suggests sympathy and compassion in a world which is terribly torn as under by the forces of disvalues. The tragedy has hardened the effeminacy and the gossamer stuff in the woman. Nayantara writes: *"Devi stole a look at the blunt profile with its short upturned nose, at the stubby small hands bunched into fists on her lap, and felt immensely relieved at the outcome of her visit."* (*ASND*: 24-25)

Sahgal is critical of moral hypocrisy and the dualistic moral standards which make man self-complacent and weak to overcome the terror of night. Mrs. Narang represents the class who is hung between tradition and modernity. She encourages her daughters to go to the dancing parties, smoke and take drinks under the façade of modernity but on the other hand she asserts their conventional outlook of life on their mind. Nita is one victim of this dubious morality who rather remains half-baked in the process of remaking to the degrees that even an arranged marriage turns out to be just an organized rape. If a few characters feel enamoured of hip-morality and are swept away by the romantic notion of marriage, they are destroyed in the process while seeking self-fulfilment. Leela, a girl from Banaras commits suicide in America in state of pregnancy for want of initiation; Madhu burns herself alive as a victim of man's naked sexuality where as Nadira becomes the victim of male-chauvinism. These female characters are the victims of social conventions and vulgar bohemian actions for want of courage and sense of 'feminine consciousnesses'.

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