

LANGUAGE IN INDIA
Strength for Today and Bright Hope for Tomorrow
Volume 10 : 3 March 2010
ISSN 1930-2940

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Man-Woman Relationship in
Nayantara Sahgal's *Mistaken Identity*

Ms. Jimmy Sharma, M.Phil.

Abstract

The oeuvre of Nayantara Sahgal's fiction is widely acknowledged for her political inclinations with political ambience of then society with the life and experiences of political personalities of elite class. Her fiction is closely interwoven with the fabric of interpersonal relationships set in the political and social milieu of India.

Dimensions of human relationships pervade all her novels and thus need to be examined minutely. Man-Woman relationship holds a vital place in these relationships and the novelist deals with this dimension of relationship with full concern and broad perspective.

Emancipation in Love Relationship

Sahgal advocates the importance of emancipation in a love relationship and urges modern woman to represent herself and her will to quench her inner thirst. She delineates the predicament of modern woman caught in the web of relationships which throws challenge to prove her worth and individuality.

One of the first internationally renowned female writers, she bagged many awards. She received the Sinclair Prize (Britain) for fiction in 1985, Sahitya Akademi Award in 1986,

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and Commonwealth Writers Award (Eurasia) in 1987. She was also a Fellow of the Woodrow Wilson International Centre for Scholars, Washington from 1981 to 1982.

Mistaken Identity

Her novel *Mistaken Identity* (1988) illustrates this fact as it lays emphasis more on man-woman relationship inside and outside the ambit of marriage. It also depicts myriad hues of various human relationships. She takes up the gender issues (Child marriage, female infanticide, polygamy and equality of women) in Man-Woman relationship (of husband-wife and lovers) and other issues of universal brotherhood with only one religion, that is, of humanity (as depicted in relationships of prison inmates) and other political, social, cultural issues in various other relationships like those of parents-children, lawyer-client and teacher-student.

Sahgal touches upon the Meerut Conspiracy case of 1920s to set political background for her story and relates the story of a aimless son (Bhushan) of a minor raja during the British rule when he is charged with treason and is thrown into jail. His identity is mistaken along with other jail mates and they are detained in jail, lost in the wilderness of the absurd kind of a trial where nothing is certain. For a few years, he stays in jail and introspects on his own life and the situation of his country in religious and social contexts.

This paper aims to discover myriad hues of the most crucial human relationship, that is, Man-Woman relationship, present in the novel.

Women and an effeminate protagonist

Bhushan, the male protagonist, is a unique and unusual character who has got a different upbringing which instils feminine qualities in him. He has various remarkable relationships with women, which bring about a change in his views and perception. He is obsessed with his first lady love, Razia; he shares "a tender close companionship" (149) with a Parsee girlfriend Sylla, a purely sexual relationship with another girlfriend, Willie-May, and in the end, he marries his cell-mate Yusuf's daughter about whom he feels: "I'd never been able to resist a woman's beauty or the culture of Islam." (238)

Bhushan calls Razia a "wild fantasy" and reckons himself her "destiny" (65), but Razia has no special feelings for Bhushan. The novelist confirms this, saying:

"She was not in love with Bhushan Singh. This is clear from the beginning. You read that she is anxious to get back to her class. She enjoys herself, but she is not besotted. He is besotted."¹

When their affair is discovered, terrifying riots break out in Vijaygarh. Many people are killed and mutilated, but Bhushan stays safe from it all. He is kept at home and then sent

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first to Bombay and then to America. But he cannot escape the clutches of Razia's infatuation. Razia, on the other hand, washes off the memories of Bhushan and later on wins the attention of a Turkish diplomat who likes her style and marries her.

However, it is remarkable to see him all devoted to her. He searches for her when he does not even know her whereabouts. As the novelist states in an interview:

"The love that has him (Bhushan) in thrall is his obsession with Razia ... Bhushan Singh spends the rest of his life obsessed with his search for Razia."²

Sylla, modern free-spirited woman and Bhushan

Sylla is another significant character in the life of Bhushan, who has "a swift flowing relationship" (35) with her. Bhushan is fully dependent on her as he declares:

"I'm nothing but a tadpole ...I'll never grow to maturity without you."(6)

Sylla is free-spirited, assertive, flamboyant and a typical independent inhabitant of upper class Bombay. She is a modern girl who is full of enthusiasm. Just like Bhushan's mother, Sylla also proves herself to be an influence in his life. Sylla has no redundancy in her. She is presented as a young Parsee woman with a westernized outlook. Bhushan says:

"I was Sylla's (mistress). I was more feminine, more gentle and compliant than her. I was the one who waited at home for her visits. She came when she wanted to... I was the one who loved to linger, loved to perform small services for her..." (150)

He describes their relationship, saying: "We took turns being aggressor or pacifier, flirting with the idea of marriage, not wanting it, wanting it. We never simultaneously wanted anything."(151) Sylla is unable to understand him at two fronts -- his obsession with Razia and his support for Hindu-Muslim unity. Finally, avoiding emotionalism and being a realist, Sylla decides that she cannot commit herself for ever to Bhushan.

Bhushan's imprisonment helps her to understand that he could never be the love of her life. He is lost in himself. She calls him a "Narcissist". (156) She is a modern girl who cannot adjust to a "walled up" (30) existence at Vijaygarh. When she decides to get married, she opts for the lawyer, Nauzer Vacha, not Bhushan Singh, perhaps because Nauzer can give her what her grandmother has hoped for her -- a future. Nauzer, as contrasted to aimless Bhushan, looks ahead in life and is a man with ambition.

Willie May – Relationship has a Beginning and an End

Another important relationship is explored before the reader when Bhushan's father sends

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him to America where the young man comes in contact with Willie May. She is attracted towards him for his oriental looks. Like Sylla, she, too, is upset with his obsession for Razia. She scolds him, saying that Razia is "a woman who wasn't there, a woman I hadn't seen, heard or felt for three years, if that wasn't the darndest, weirdest, nonsense."(128) With her, Bhushan shares a delightful, purely sexual relationship. The novelist herself describes their relationship:

"She teaches him to drink cocktails out of a teacup during Prohibition in the US and to do the Bunny Hug, the Turkey Trot and all the other fashionable ballroom dances. This relationship has a beginning and an end."³

She is an outspoken, western girl who openly declares her views on the topic of sex that "everybody needs sex. Sex is good for you. We'd go crazy if we didn't get enough of it." (128)

Courageous Hero or Some Caveman?

Willie fantasizes being loved by a courageous hero or some caveman. The moment she comes in contact with a man of her choice, she runs, without delaying, off to marry him. She always gets what she wants. Bhushan comments that "she was divinely happy."(176) Thus, this relationship of two young lovers portrays an adolescent yearning for physical pleasure.

Reversing Roles of Man and Woman

Bhushan's search for the ideal of womanhood comes to an end only after his marriage with comrade Yusuf's daughter. Though the novelist has not mentioned her name anywhere, yet the influence of Yusuf's daughter upon Bhushan is immense. The novelist has given a new dimension to their relationship by reversing the conventional and typical roles assigned to husband and wife by Indian society.

Sahgal tries to bring to the readers' attention that a woman can also perform administrative and other activities outside the home. Bhushan, now, continues his writing work for hours together every day. He recounts the truth of what "had attracted us to each other...is her heart went out to a frightened poet, and mine was bewitched by a sign of the times."(238)

The Ranee: A modern woman evolving out of traditional baggage

There is another important couple in the novel -- the Ranee and Raja of Vijaygarh. Raja, the father of Bhushan, has married thrice. Ranee, the mother of Bhushan, is ill-treated and despised by her husband. She is intense, illiterate, but intelligent human being. Through their relationship, the novelist attacks the parochial and discriminatory rules and

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regulations of patriarchal society.

On the one hand, the society puts certain restrictions on women like the *ranee* to remain isolated in their Zenana, while on the other hand, it encourages the Raja's ostentatious life style and approves of his bigamous marriages under the ruse that he has waited for nine years after the birth of his only son and neither a boy nor a girl has been born to Bhushan's mother or the 1908 wife. It is ironical how a woman is subjected to various restrictions and tortures, while a man is free to do whatever he wishes to do.

Life Is a Punishment

Ranee is a silent observer and her life is a punishment, given so garishly and graphically. Destiny, however, has secured some secret happiness and emancipation for Bhushan's mother. She chooses to elope with the right man, Yusuf, in whose company she spends the rest of her life.

With Yusuf's arrival, there comes a sea change in her life. From a mere helpless spectator, she now articulates her likes and choice. The *ranee* who has endured silent indifference of her husband, now needs neither the approval of a decadent society, nor the consent of an apathetic husband for taking her decision. She ultimately creates a stir in the orthodox society of early 20th century and elopes with her communist lover. As

Bhushan puts it:

"Early one morning she left the family mansion...she walked out to star in the most sensational scandal of the generation. Society has not forgiven this liaison between an illiterate ranee and her communist lover, and the shameless public exhibition they make of it." (238)

The novelist puts forth the modern view of living where women should be given full freedom to express their individuality and escape from suffering and injustice.

Conclusion

The novel weaves a beautiful, realistic and convincing fabric of man-woman relationship in a subtle manner. The novelist highlights the significance of a man's influence on a woman's life and the vice-versa. This influence conditions the working of the person's psyche.

Bhushan Singh, the narrator and Sahgal's mouthpiece, encounters various women in his life and thus, undergoes varied experiences and reaches maturity towards the end of the novel. Ranee, Sylla and Razia are the ones who emerge out sensible modern women because of their interpersonal relationships. Once they meet the right partners of their

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respective lives, they get a ray of life and hope out of their listless and drab life. The novelist, thus, promotes man-woman's mutual love and understanding with due respect to each other's individuality and presence of throb of life in their hearts without confining to futile social and cultural imposition.

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