

Contours of Familial Conflict and Feminine Selfhood in the Novels of Nayantara Sahgal

T.N. MASTHANAPPA

Lecturer in English
Government degree college
Uravakonda
Anantapur district
Andhra Pradesh

Abstract

This paper examines the representation of familial conflicts in the novels of Nayantara Sahgal within the socio-cultural transformation of post-independence India. It explores how Sahgal portrays the Indian middle-class family as a site of psychological tension, gendered power structures, and evolving selfhood. Through an analysis of selected novels—*Storm in Chandigarh*, *The Day in Shadow*, *This Time of Morning*, *A Situation in New Delhi*, *A Time to Be Happy*, and *Mistaken Identity*—the study highlights conflicts between tradition and modernity, patriarchy and individuality, and marriage and self-realization. The paper argues that Sahgal's fiction does not reject marriage as an institution but redefines it as a partnership grounded in equality, communication, and mutual respect. Her women characters represent an emergent Indian feminist consciousness that seeks freedom while remaining rooted in cultural values.

Keywords: Nayantara Sahgal, Familial Conflict, Indian Feminism, Marriage, Patriarchy, Middle-Class Identity, Selfhood, Gender Equality

Introduction

The family, the smallest unit of society, functions as the primary space for emotional, social, and ideological formation. In Indian society, particularly during the transition from joint to nuclear family structures, this institution has undergone significant transformation. The novels of Nayantara Sahgal explore this transition by presenting the family not merely as a domestic setting but as a microcosm of broader socio-political change. Sahgal's works primarily portray the educated urban middle class, highlighting how industrialization, Western influence, and emerging feminist awareness challenge traditional familial structures. Her narratives foreground tensions between inherited customs and the growing desire for individual autonomy, particularly among women.

Familial Conflict as a Reflection of Social Transition

In Sahgal's fiction, familial conflicts extend beyond personal disagreements and represent the larger ideological shift occurring in Indian society. The patriarchal family system—deeply rooted in caste, religion, and gender hierarchy—faces increasing scrutiny as individuals begin to question inherited norms. Marriage, traditionally viewed as sacred and permanent, becomes a central site where issues of power, gender expectations, and personal freedom are negotiated. Sahgal's women characters are neither passive victims nor radical rebels. Instead, they embody a reflective and culturally aware form of resistance that represents a distinctly Indian model of feminism.

Marriage as the Central Arena of Conflict

Storm in Chandigarh

In *Storm in Chandigarh*, Saroj's marriage to Inder becomes a battleground shaped by suspicion and patriarchal morality. Saroj's honest confession of a premarital relationship becomes a tool for Inder's emotional domination. His reaction reflects entrenched male ego and the persistence of double moral standards within patriarchal society. While Saroj seeks emotional equality and transparency, Inder views marriage as a form of possession. Through this relationship, Sahgal exposes how patriarchal pride corrodes intimacy and transforms love into surveillance.

The Day in Shadow

Simrit's divorce in *The Day in Shadow* challenges conventional perceptions of marriage. Even after separation, she faces financial exploitation, revealing how patriarchal control continues beyond the marital bond. However, Simrit's journey is ultimately one of self-discovery and empowerment. Sahgal portrays divorce not as a failure but as a step toward personal dignity and independence. Marriage, in this context, must be based on reciprocity rather than coercion.

This Time of Morning

In *This Time of Morning*, the characters Nita and Rashmi represent young women who question traditional expectations regarding marriage. Nita refuses to become merely a decorative acquisition within a socially advantageous alliance. Instead, she seeks economic independence and emotional fulfilment. Through such characters, Sahgal critiques the tendency to treat marriage as a transaction governed by social prestige and financial security.

Mistaken Identity

In *Mistaken Identity*, Bhushan's mother openly challenges marital betrayal by leaving her polygamous husband. Although her decision invites social condemnation, it reveals her inner strength and commitment to self-respect. Sahgal portrays her not as a morally transgressive figure but as a woman reclaiming agency within a restrictive social order.

Patriarchy and Feminine Selfhood

Sahgal critiques patriarchy primarily through psychological exploration rather than overt ideological confrontation. Her female protagonists resist being reduced to possessions within the patriarchal household. They challenge the cultural assumption that feminine virtue lies in silent endurance and unquestioning obedience.

Unlike the conventional ideal of the submissive woman, Sahgal's "New Woman" defines virtue through courage, self-respect, and intellectual independence. Marriage, in her vision, should function as a partnership based on equality and communication. When these elements are absent, alienation and conflict inevitably arise.

Tradition, Modernity, and Negotiated Freedom

Despite her critique of patriarchal structures, Sahgal does not advocate unrestrained rebellion. Instead, her characters often embody a form of ethical resistance reminiscent of Gandhian principles. They display patience and endurance until moral boundaries are crossed, at which point they assert their independence.

This nuanced feminism balances personal freedom with social responsibility. Relationships in Sahgal's novels are not sensationalized or reduced to physical desire. Rather, emotional fulfilment and mutual respect form the foundation of meaningful companionship.

Conflict Resolution and Psychological Insight

The strategies of resolving familial conflict in Sahgal's fiction vary—from separation and self-realization to reconciliation through understanding. Rarely do her narratives culminate in destructive collapse. Instead, they suggest that familial harmony depends upon communication, emotional maturity, and the recognition of individual identity within relationships.

Misunderstanding and rigid social expectations, rather than the institution of family itself, become the primary sources of conflict.

Conclusion

Familial conflict in Nayantara Sahgal's novels serves as a powerful lens through which the transformation of Indian society can be examined. Through her portrayal of middle-class protagonists, Sahgal highlights the tension between inherited traditions and emerging modern consciousness.

Her women characters seek neither domination nor rebellion for its own sake. Rather, they strive for dignity, autonomy, and meaningful selfhood. Sahgal ultimately reimagines marriage and family as evolving institutions that must accommodate freedom, equality, and emotional reciprocity. Her fiction thus contributes significantly to Indian feminist discourse by envisioning the family not as a site of oppression but as a space capable of ethical and emotional renewal.

Copyright & License:

© Authors retain the copyright of this article. This work is published under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY 4.0), permitting unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.