

## A Feminist Interpretation of Nayantara Sahgal's "Plans for Departure"

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### **Abstract**

*Mrs. Nayantara Sahgal is a great Indian English novelist who has distinguished herself in the field of fiction by the publication of two autobiographies namely, "Prison and chocolate cake" and "From fear Set Free" and several other soul-stirring novels. She is a born feminist and fighting for the rights of women is her main fictional concern. This research paper is an attempt to depict the character of Anna Hensen as a feminist in Mrs. Nayantara Sahgal's popular novel "Plans for Departure." Anna Hensen, a Danish woman comes to India and stays in Himapur for three months to look after a talented scientist Sir Nitin Basu, a Professor at Allahabad University. During this short stay Anna's meetings with people like Henry Brewster, the District Magistrate of Himapur, Mr. Marlowe, a missionary and his wife, and various political and social events that take place in slave India reveal the traits of her character like love for personal freedom, the quest for identity, interest in contemporary events and staying against injustice and exploitation that are enough to prove her a true feminist.*

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## **Introduction**

Mrs. Nayantara Sahgal, a great Indian English novelist has distinguished herself in the field of fiction by the publication of two autobiographies namely, "Prison and chocolate cake" and "From fear Set Free" and several other soul-stirring novels. She is a born feminist and women play a dominant role in her fictional work. She herself accepts that in spite of belonging to a political family her fictional concern is chiefly woman and her position in society but Mrs. Sahgal does not essentially root herself in Indian culture and tradition like Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao, and R.K. Narayan, rather she chooses her characters from foreign-countries as well. Her education at Wellesley College in America and her experience of American-society during young age has made her bold enough to fight for the rights of women. That is why most of her women characters are feminists who face the challenges of life and male-tyranny without fear and finally emerge into bright circumstances of life. Sonali in "Rich Like Us", Nita Narang and Rashmi in "This time of Morning", Saroj in "Storm in Chandigarh", Simrit in "The Day in Shadow", Devi in "A Situation in New Delhi" and Maya and Kusum Sahai in "A Time to be Happy" are some such female characters to quote.

In the Introduction of her book "Feminisms," Arpita Mukhopadhyay writes : "Feminism seeks to address the inequalities that exist between men and women in a society. Feminists refuse to accept these disparities as natural and seek to examine the material reality of the lives of women to understand and explain the pedagogy of oppression. Traditionally, the production of knowledge has been androcentric, that is, men have been the producers of knowledge, while women are relegated to the position of being objects inscribed in/by androcentric knowledge. Feminism challenges this status quo, by seeking to produce/generate knowledge about and for women." (Mukhopadhyay Feminisms Introduction).

This research paper is an attempt to depict the character of Anna Hensen as a feminist in Mrs. Nayantara Sahgal's well-known novel, "Plans for Departure." First published in 1986 the novel opens with a conversation between Sir Nitin Basu, a renowned scientist, and Anna Hensen, a Danish woman in the service of this scientist for three months in Dimapur. She has been sent to look after this talented scientist who has escaped the life of popularity and fame in Allahabad University as a Professor and sought shelter in Himapur village for mental peace and rest. Mrs. Sahgal has portrayed the character of Anna bursting with energy, enthusiasm, and positivity towards life and she reminds us Mrs. Walsh, an American woman whom

Mrs. Sahgal met in the country-home in Pennsylvania while staying in America for study. She mentions this woman in her autobiography "Prison and Chocolate Cake."

"We were struck by Mrs. Walsh's untiring energy and love of living. She often said that one lifetime was far too short to do all that she wanted to do. The business of living was neither mere fact nor routine to her. It was an adventure of which she could never have enough. She felt that life itself was the greatest gift imaginable, for it opened up avenues through which the world in its infinite variety could be explored." (Sahgal *Prison and Chocolate Cake* 155)

The beginning of the novel shows that Anna has her own way of looking at life which is apparent even in her eating habits. She is self-dependent, tall, and conscious: "..... her figure uncannily erect, if you could call such unflinchingly straight elongated lines a female figure. She was eating a curious-looking concoction of nasturtium-seeds, mint and unidentifiable leaves and grasses, which she was welcome to punish herself with provided she left her diet alone." (Sahgal *Plans for Departure* 11)

We Come to know through the novel that Anna's short stay in Himapur revolves around three major characters respectively, Henry Brewster, the District Magistrate of Himapur, Sir Nitin Basu, and a missionary Marlowe in British-ruled Indian. Her habits of usually taking six miles walk, climbing the hill on foot, reading books, and sitting straight indicate her self-sufficiency and optimism like a true feminist. She is intelligent, dynamic, and laborious as she comes from a country where even the queen goes on a bicycle to buy vegetables and the kings play tennis in their nineties to remind us of the difference between the east and the west.

The portrayal of abundant foreign characters like Rose, Neuman, Mr. Goldfinkel, Neil Berensen, Cora, Mark Mcivor, Cyril Weatherby, Aunt Miranda, etc. in Mrs. Nayantara Sahgal's fiction reveals her experience and exposure to foreign-life and people. Moreover, during her stay in America, she met eminent people like Paul Robeson, Mrs. Robeson, Hellen Keller, Pearl Buck, Dorothy, Elly, Razzack, Mr. Bevin, Mr. Vishinsky, and Emir Feisal and their influence on her can be seen in the form of these foreign characters, their ideology and their way of leading life. Mrs. Sahgal also highly appreciates western-life where people are laborious, enthusiastic, and full of self-confidence:

"It was a joy to be where plenty was framed in every shop window, where the people were strong and beautiful with good health, alert with self-confidence. It was dazzling and disturbing. These men and women were insulated against the trials that beset ordinary people the world over. They were products of controlled conditions,

flourishing in a superbly organized laboratory of a nation. For all their talk of the common man, they were highly uncommon people. For all their individualism they rejoiced in a crushing conformity.”(Sahgal *From Fear Set Free* 110-111)

A thorough analysis of Anna's character reveals that she loves personal freedom and yearns for self-identity which motivates her to leave England for India and to explore new and novel avenues of life at a time when she was enjoying the love of Nicholas. She reveals it later to the photographer Madhav in India:

“After I read Hinduism”, said Anna, “I suddenly say to me, in my next life I hope I am a man. But it is too long to wait, so I set myself free in this life.” (*Plans for Departure* 55)

The patriotic fervor of young Anna is enhanced by Emily Davidson, a political and social activist in England who stayed in jail eight times, was on hunger strike seven times, forced fed forty-nine times, and attempted martyrdom two times-all for the sake of emancipation of women. During her stay in Himapur Anna sometimes feels herself misplaced and culturally dislocated as there is a difference between eastern and western ways of leading life. Her busying herself with Henry Brewster's library, her strolling, and the boredom felt by her at Mrs. Bannerji's house reveal it. Her habit of staying alone, wandering alone is also unusual to Himapur surroundings. The scientist's sister tries to clear the fog:

“In Europe, women thought nothing of it. They took hikes. They scaled cliffs. They pedaled exhausting miles on bicycles. Being single and female was no problem. She doesn't need a chaperone.”(107)

While staying in Himapur Anna develops a love for Henry Brewster but a few misunderstandings like Henry's behavior to his wife Stella whom she suspects to be murdered by Henry strengthen her plan for departure and she departs after three months. One more chapter of Anna's life begins in England where she takes a night shift in a factory to work for munitions as the First world war begins and it makes her realize her dignity as part of an international sisterhood.

Obviously, Anna represents the modern feminist woman who believes in exploring her inner self, her inner satisfaction and after establishing her own identity in India as well as in England she plans to marry Nicholas. In a foreign country like England marriage is not a bondage, it does not limit one's freedom and identity, rather it is the culmination of one's happiness and satisfaction. But the end of the novel shows the rhythm of their married-life disturbed due to the ghost of Henry Brewster's memories. The letter received by Anna three months after his death which reveals Henry to be innocent and his wife alive and married to Prior leaves

Anna stunned and her love for Henry becomes profound enough to spoil her conjugal harmony. It leaves her deaf and silent. Nicholas, her husband realizes it fully.

“In the course of her intensely emotional wanderings a marriage had occurred between the two of them, and the more he thought about it, the more he was inclined to put it down to a haphazard conjunction of planets that had nothing to do with a responsible, conscious decision, which, of course, was nonsense” (200)

Thus mystery, memories, and attachment to the past seem to be part and parcel of Anna’s life. She fights, she faces the challenges of life, and paves way for herself. A good deal of concern for and participation in contemporary political debates, entering the institution of marriage thoughtfully, hankering after true love and, above all, kindness, humanity, and her staying against crime are a few traits of Anna’s character which make her a true feminist.

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