

DEPICTION OF WOMEN IN NAYANTARA SAHGAL'S NOVEL "MISTAKEN IDENTITY"

Prof. Nirmala Pant

Head, Department of English

Soban Singh Jenna University, Almora (Uttarakhand)

Email: 31nirmalapant@gmail.com

Abstract

Mrs Nayantara Sahgal's recent novel "Mistaken Identity" which was published in 1988 in London, depicts a variety of women characters, Indians as well as foreigners. She spent her early childhood at Anand Bhawan in Allahabad a center of all kinds of political activities in pre-independence India and was visited by several people including women also. Therefore she had a good opportunity to examine and experience the life and problems of these women. Further her education at Wellesley College in America equally provided her an opportunity to observe and experience the ways, ideals and lifestyles of women abroad. Naturally this wide experience is very well reflected in her novel "Mistaken Identity" through characters like Bhushan Singh, mother, Razia, Sylla, Bittan and Willie May. These Women characters reveal themes like exploitation, uncontrolled freedom, sick patriarchal social structure and lack of balance in marriage matters in the novel "Mistaken Identity."

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Prof. Nirmala Pant,

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Mrs Nayantara Sahgal's recent novel "Mistaken Identity" published in 1988 in London, depicts a variety of women characters, Indians as well as foreigners. Her early childhood was spent at Anand-Bhawan in Allahabad. This was the time when India was ruled by the British government. Naturally the political and social life of the country was a little disturbed. Anand-Bhawan at that time was the center of all kinds of political activities visited by all kinds of people including women also. Therefore Mrs Sahgal had a very good opportunity to observe and experience a variety of women coming from all backgrounds. Further her education at Wellesley College in America provided her a chance to understand the ways, ideals and lifestyle of women abroad. This experience is very well reflected in the fictional work of Mrs Nayantara Sahgal. "Mistaken Identity" is no doubt, one of them.

At the beginning of the novel we become acquainted with the Narrator Bhushan Singh's mother who represents hundreds of those women who spent a loveless, neglected life in their husband's house in pre-independence India. Those who were rich, entertained themselves in the

company of female servants and followers, but the poor women were compelled to lead a lonely and wretched life. An early marriage made their life doubly miserable. The protagonist's mother was thirteen years old when she was married, obviously the duties related to marriage and householdship were beyond her comprehension. Joy was visible in every ritual:

"Whatever had come over the shy thirteen-year-old rosebud bride she had brought to Vijaygarh? What in the world could have happened in something so ordinary as marriage to wound her dove, her timid little love? Every custom ritual had been observed, every detail perfectly planned and beautifully carried out. The child had been pledged at five, delivered at menstruation to his house. A late bloomer, it was true, piteously reluctant to bleed, unfold, be a woman." (Nayantara Sahgal *Mistaken Identity* 27)

Bhusan Singh's mother was the wife of the Raja of Vijaygarh. She lived in full luxury in her mansion, though fully neglected by her husband, who represents the patriarchal social structure of slave-India but misfortune and sufferings begin in the life of the mother when her husband marries for a second and third time with full pomp and show. We come to know through the novel that one thousand people traveled by train to fetch the new bride. The ceremony continued for one week followed by singing, dancing, food and drinks:

"Our public buildings were electrically illuminated by special generators. Vijaygarh didn't get electricity until a few years ago- and there were more singers,

dancers, wrestlers, acrobats, food, drink and poetry than the first or second time. Yes, it was very public, and a very popular wedding.” (Mistaken Identity 33)

This third marriage took place because his first or second wife could not beget a son or a daughter. No doubt, this was a usual practice in pre-independence India. The longing for a son forced hundreds of men to remarry.

The second important woman character in the novel “Mistaken Identity” is Razia, a Muslim girl whose love Bhushan Singh pursues throughout his life. She is the daughter of an inspector of schools. Both are caught while making physical love in a nearby jungle of Razia’s college and it takes the form of Hindu-Muslim riot in Vijaygarh after that Razia disappears forever from the life of Bhushan Singh, though his search for the girl continues throughout:

“What if I never found Razia? What if I found her soul destroyed and brutally used in some human kennel of a slum? I dreaded finding her, and I dreaded abandoning all hope of finding her. Either way I was in a trap.” (Mistaken Identity 126)

Characters like Razia are victims of a sick society divided into Hindu and Muslim, Communities. In matters like marriage there is the least tolerance.

Another woman character acquiring prominence in the novel is Sylla whom the Narrator meets in Hotel Taz. She is a Parsi girl associated with drama.. performance. She represents a modern Indian woman wearing transparent dresses, short-haired and caring much for personal pleasures. Sex is a common and usual for her as the change of seasons:

“..... and we lay windmilled across the unused bed, she shifted herself comfortably into position and took charge of operations with her commander’s skill, while I did the weary mechanical thing without a hope of recapturing my cleansing anger.”(Mistaken Identity 5).

Sylla maintains her presence throughout the novel, sometimes as a guide and sometimes as a true friend, a true companion but after experiencing the madness of Bhushan Singh for Razia she refuses to marry him, though he personally requests her at the end of the novel. As writes

M.K. Naik in his book “A History of Indian English Literature” about Mrs. Nayantara Sahgal:

“..... And the daughter of Vijayalakshmi Pandit and niece of Jawaharlal Nehru, Nayantara naturally had an upbringing in which politics was inevitably a strong ambience, but along with the obvious political theme, her fiction is also preoccupied with the modern Indian woman’s search for sexual freedom and self-realization.” (M.K. Naik: A History of Indian English Literature 250)

Further through Bhushan Singh's search for Razia we come to know about women coming from different backgrounds who were involved in immoral activities. His visit to Kamatipura, to Grant Road and to the Red Light area acquaints him with women from the hills, from Assam and North east with names like Annie and Ida. He could experience the helplessness and pain hidden behind their powdered faces:

"I closely inspected everyone. It would never do to glance and pass on. A life in Kamatipura could change a woman drastically and there are disguises without number- dirt, fatigue, dress and expression apart from paint". (Mistaken Identity 138)

In her autobiography "Prison and Chocolate Cake" Nayantara Sahgal describes how she with her two sisters Chandralekha and Rita was brought up by eight governesses who motivated her to a controlled life with boiled vegetables, regular walks and early bedtime. Further there was a sweeper- a woman Lachmania, poor and hardworking who brought her children with her even in extreme hot and cold. These real-life characters inspired Mrs Sahgal to create a character like Bittan in "Mistaken Identity" She is a maidservant in Bhushan Singh's mansion. She is energetic enough with a shining face and leads a simple life.

Chapter ten of the novel introduces Willie May, an advanced American girl. She refuses to go to a girl's school for the sake of her sex life. She is extremely beautiful with unbridled sexual orientation:

"..... Everybody needs sex. Sex is good for you. We'd go crazy if we didn't get enough of it." (Mistaken Identity 103)

Bhushan flirts with Willie May in America. He enjoys movies and dances with her. American life fascinates him and he even thinks of being an actor in a movie. He makes physical love with her in bed, and at swimming pool. Everywhere. Willie thus represents those American girls for whom life is the other name of dance, sex and enjoyment:

"Willie May and I were left to ourselves to dance, go to banquette lunches and the movies, and keep ourselves healthy." (Mistaken Identity 112)

In Her autobiography "Prison and Chocolate Cake" Mrs Sahgal reveals that she got her education at Wellesley College in America. She stayed there for four years and during this period she had a good opportunity to observe and experience the life and ideals of Americans. She met people like Mrs Frances Gunther, Mrs Sanger, Helen Keller, Mrs Walsh Dorothy Norman, Pearl Buck, Paul Robeson, Mrs Robeson, Mr. Bewin, Elly and Razzack. She also visited places like Enfield,

Connecticut, Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, California, Mexico, Boston and Los Angeles. This wide experience is very well reflected in her novel “Mistaken Identity.”

It was the formative influence of real-life women from the family and surroundings of Mrs Nayantara Sahgal like her mother Vijaya Laxmi Pandit, Indira Gandhi, Nanima, Mrs Sarojini Naidu, Padmaja Naidu, Tante Anna, her two sisters Chandralekha and Rita, Lachmania and in America women like Mrs Roberson, Elly, Dorothy and Helen Keller, that she dexterously created fictitious characters like Bhushan Singh’s mother, Razia, Sylla, Willie May and Bittan in her novel “Mistaken Identity.” Through these women characters the novelist exposes themes like exploitation, uncontrolled freedom in matters of sex and love, patriarchal Social structure and its out comes and imbalance in society in marriage matters.

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