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Articulating Women's Silence: Gender and Political Turmoil in Nayantara Sahgal's A Situation in New Delhi

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Abstract

Nayantara Sahgal occupies a distinctive place in post-independence Indian literature not only because of her political lineage as a member of the Nehru family but also because of the depth with which she engages with the political and social realities of her time. Her fiction is marked by a persistent concern with themes such as political disillusionment, democratic values, moral responsibility and the lived experiences of women navigating patriarchal and often authoritarian systems. Rather than separating the personal from the political, Sahgal brings them into constant conversation, revealing how national events shape and are shaped by individual lives. Her 1977 novel *A Situation in New Delhi* offers a compelling portrayal of India in the throes of ideological uncertainty and political instability following Jawaharlal Nehru's death. While the narrative focuses on the nation's fractured identity, it also draws attention to voices that are too often overlooked particularly those of women. This novel illustrates how moments of political crisis can deepen existing inequalities, pushing women further into the margins. This paper examines Sahgal's representation of women in this context, with particular focus on how she critiques patriarchal norms and reveals the subtle ways in which female subjectivity is suppressed or erased. This study explores how Sahgal uses fiction not only as a tool for political commentary but also as a space to reimagine power, resistance, and the possibilities of female agency.

Keywords: Marginalization, Postcolonial India, Patriarchy, Gender, Power, Resistance

Introduction

Nayantara Sahgal's *A Situation in New Delhi* is a powerful reminder that political upheaval doesn't just happen in parliaments or on the streets it also reaches into homes, relationships, and individual lives. Set in the aftermath of India's independence, during a time of intense national uncertainty, the novel looks beyond the surface of political events to focus on the quieter, often overlooked stories particularly those of women. In a world where political narratives are usually told by and about men, Sahgal turns the lens in a different direction, highlighting how women are pushed to the side lines, not just in public debates, but in their own households and personal lives. What make the novel so compelling is how clearly it asks, who gets to speak, and who is expected to stay silent? Even when women are educated, thoughtful and politically aware, they're often treated as background characters in the larger story. This piece explores how the novel brings those buried voices to the surface and asks us to rethink what real empowerment looks like. Sahgal's work pushes us to consider that question, not just in literature, but in the world we live in today.

Patriarchal Structures in Political and Domestic Spheres

This novel *A Situation in New Delhi*, draws a clear link between the world of politics and everyday life at home, showing how both are shaped by the same deeply rooted patriarchy. What goes on in government buildings and what happens around the family dinner table might seem like two very different things but Sahgal makes it clear they're not. In politics, men hold most of the power they make the big decisions, control the story being told, and often treat women's voices like they don't matter. And at

home, things aren't much different. Traditional roles still expect women to stay quiet, be supportive and remain in the background even when they have just as much to say and just as much understanding as the men around them. Through characters like Maya, Sahgal helps us feel what it's like to live and caught between these two worlds.

Maya is smart and politically aware, but she's constantly reminded of her limits. Her ideas get brushed aside, and her opinions are often ignored whether she's joining a political discussion or simply trying to be heard within her own family. Sahgal uses Maya's story to challenge the idea that politics is only for men. She shows us that this belief doesn't just shape policy it influences families, relationships, and the small moments of everyday life. What really stands out is how these two worlds the public and the private feed into each other. When women are expected to be silent at home, it becomes easier to overlook them in public life. And when women are shut out of politics, their silence at home starts to feel natural. Sahgal's message is clear: patriarchy isn't just something "out there" in society it's woven into the very fabric of our daily lives. If we want real change, we have to start questioning the systems that keep women quiet in both places.

The Silencing of Women's Voices

At the heart of Sahgal's story, the way women get pushed aside during times of political chaos. Even though the women in the novel like Maya and her family are sharp thinkers, socially aware, and deeply engaged with what's happening around them, their voices are constantly drowned out by a system that favors men. These characters have to face not just the political uncertainty outside but also the quiet, persistent silencing that comes from patriarchal attitudes at home and in society. Political discussions and decisions are almost always dominated by men, focusing on power, ideology, and control, while women's real-life experiences and concerns are often ignored or brushed off. This novel highlights this exclusion by showing how women's insights are dismissed as unimportant, keeping them stuck in the background both in public life and within their own families. The novel makes it clear that during moments of national crisis, this side lining of women only gets worse, as male authority tries to tighten its grip. This silencing isn't accidental it's built into the very way patriarchal politics works. By keeping men's voices front and center, existing power structures stay in place, and gender inequality is reinforced. Sahgal's narrative shines a light on this harsh reality, asking us to pay attention to the women who are too often left unheard.

Education and Voice: Empowerment Without Access to Power

Sahgal foregrounds a paradox faced by educated

women in patriarchal societies. Although equipped with critical thinking skills, political awareness, and articulate self-expression, they remain excluded from real power. Maya exemplifies this contradiction; she is well-read, socially aware and intellectually sophisticated, yet her education does not shield her from marginalization or dismissal. Instead, it deepens her frustration by heightening her awareness of her own political impotence. Maya's rich internal reflections contrast sharply with the dismissive treatment she receives from male counterparts who dominate political and domestic discourse. This disjunction underscores a key critique in the novel, empowerment through education is hollow without corresponding structural change. Sahgal thus asserts that genuine liberation for women requires institutional transformation that dismantles patriarchal exclusions and facilitates women's meaningful participation in power structures.

Conclusion

Nayantara Sahgal's *A Situation in New Delhi* offers a deeply honest look at how patriarchy runs through both politics and everyday family life in post-independence India. She doesn't just tell a story about national unrest she shows how that unrest affects real people, especially women who are often left out of the conversation. Sahgal draws attention to the ways in which power, whether in government or at home, is almost always in the hands of men and how that leaves women struggling to be heard, no matter how educated or aware they are. What makes the novel so striking is its focus on women who are thoughtful, politically conscious and eager to engage with the world around them but still find themselves pushed aside. Sahgal makes it clear that personal empowerment can only go so far.

If the systems around women don't change, if their voices aren't welcomed into the spaces where decisions are made then progress stalls. Real change, she suggests, requires more than individual strength; it calls for a complete rethinking of how power is shared.

In this way, Sahgal's novel becomes more than just a reflection of its time it's a call to action. By bringing these silenced voices to the forefront, she challenges us to see the everyday ways in which gender inequality is maintained, and to imagine what a more just and inclusive society could look like.

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