



# The Institution of Marriage, Modernity, and Women's Freedom in Nayantara Sahgal's *This Time of Morning*

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**Abstract:** *The present study examines marriage, modernity, and women's freedom in Nayantara Sahgal's This Time of Morning. The aim of the research is to explore the transformative role of women and their struggle for identity and freedom within a society caught between traditions and emerging modern values. It adopts a qualitative approach, closely analysing the text along with perspectives from post-independence Indian English literature to understand changing gender roles and social conditions. The study reveals that Sahgal presents marriage as a limiting institution that often suppresses a woman's individuality, while her female characters challenge male dominance and strive for independence. It further observes that modernity in the novel goes beyond mere imitation of Western lifestyles but represents a quest for selfhood and intellectual freedom. The crisis between traditional values and modern ideas highlights the restrictions placed on women in both familial and societal frameworks. The study concludes that women's liberation is an ongoing process of self-realisation, where freedom comes from breaking away from rigid norms and redefining their identity beyond predetermined roles.*

**Keywords:** *feminism, modernity, identity, freedom, marriage institution, and gender role, etc.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION:

Marriage is an important social institution that has long shaped the lives of men and women, especially in traditional Indian society, where it often expects women to be obedient and self-sacrificing. On the other hand, modernity brings new ideas such as education, individuality, and freedom of choice, which begin to challenge these conservative beliefs. Further, women's freedom is closely linked with this change, as it focuses on a woman's right to think independently, make her own decisions, and live with dignity. Nayantara Sahgal's *This Time of Morning* reflects this social situation through female characters and their struggles and sacrifices, which highlights the difficulties they faced in breaking away from rigid customs.

## 2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE:

Gunasekaran and R. Santhi, in their article, shows the condition of women as suppressed voices in society. The study focuses on female characters like Rashmi, Nita, and Mira to explain how women suffer under social rules and family pressure. It explored that even in matters like marriage, women's opinions are often ignored. It also highlights tradition and patriarchy that keep women dependent on men throughout their lives. The authors explain that Sahgal presents the inner feelings and struggles of these women, which are not easily accepted by society. The article reveals that women try to resist these limits and seek freedom. At the end, the study presents women as subaltern figures who struggle to find their voice and identity.

Further, Singh's Ph.D. thesis (2021), titled *A Postcolonial Study of Nayantara Sahgal's Fiction*, offers a close analysis of Sahgal's novels using a postcolonial perspective. The research looks at how Sahgal's works reflect the cultural, political, and social changes that took place after colonial rule. It deals with themes like nationalism, identity, power, and the impact of colonial rule. The thesis also examines ideas like decolonisation, cultural mixing, gender issues, and resistance. Singh adopts an interdisciplinary approach by bringing together literature, history, culture, gender studies, and postcolonial theory to better understand Sahgal's writing. Overall, the thesis presents a detailed analysis of Sahgal's fiction and shows how her works deal with important postcolonial concerns while adding to the study of postcolonial literature. Additionally, K. Siva Madasamy and V. Chanthiramathi, in their research study *Marital*



*Struggles and Female Identity in Nayantara Sahgal's A Time to Be Happy and This Time of Morning*, focus on the problems faced by women within marriage and their search for identity. The authors examine how marriage often becomes a source of conflict and dissatisfaction for women in Sahgal's novels. It shows that female characters struggle to balance their personal desires with the expectations placed on them by family and society. The study revealed that these women are not passive, but they question their roles and try to find their own space. It also highlights how patriarchal values restrict women's freedom and affect their sense of self. Through the analysis, the authors bring out the emotional and psychological struggles of women. Overall, the article presents marriage as a challenging experience and shows how women attempt to assert their identity.

A close review of existing research on Nayantara Sahgal's works shows that most scholars have examined her writing through themes like secularism, modernism, empowerment, self-identity, freedom, colonialism, nationalism, and cultural hybridity. Recognising this gap, the present study looks at the relationship between marriage, modern values, and women's freedom in order to examine how marriage is portrayed in *This Time of Morning*, particularly in showing the conflict between traditional beliefs and changing modern views about women's roles; to analyse the idea of modernity in the novel and how it shapes women's quest for identity and freedom, both within marriage and outside it. Further, it explores how Sahgal portrays women's freedom as a reaction against the constraints of marriage and tradition, highlighting the changing awareness and outlook of women in a society moving towards modernity. This study is undertaken to find answers to the following research questions:

1. In what ways does Nayantara Sahgal present the institution of marriage in *This Time of Morning*, and how does it bring out the conflict between traditional norms and emerging modern ideas?
2. How is modernity shown in the novel, and how does it shape women's identity, independence, and sense of personal freedom?
3. How does the novel portray women's freedom as a reaction against the restrictions of marriage and patriarchal values in a society that is undergoing change?

### 3. METHODOLOGY:

This study uses a qualitative approach and is mainly based on a careful and detailed reading of the novel. The characters, their relationships, and their experiences are examined in detail to see how they reflect social and cultural changes. A feminist perspective is used to understand the position of women in the novel and the challenges they face within marriage and society. The study combines close reading and critical interpretation to explain how marriage, modernity, and women's freedom are connected in the novel.

### 4. NAYANTARA SAHGAL (B. 1927)

Nayantara Sahgal is a prominent Indian English author of the post-independence period. She was born in 1927 in Uttar Pradesh and comes from the well-known Nehru-Gandhi family. She is Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit's daughter and Jawaharlal Nehru's niece. Along with writing novels, she has also worked as a political columnist, contributing to newspapers like *The Sunday Standard*. Her writing shows a strong understanding of India's political and social life. Sahgal began her writing career in the 1950s and soon became known for her sharp portrayal of Indian society. Her novels, essays, and short stories deal with themes like identity, patriarchy, women's rights, relationships, and social change. She is also recognised as a feminist writer who highlights the struggles and rights of women, using clear and simple language to express her ideas. Sahgal's first memoir, *Prison and Chocolate Cake* (1954), drew attention for its portrayal of the struggles faced by women in Indian society. Some of her most significant literary works, including *A Time to Be Happy* (1963), *This Time of Morning* (1965), *Storm in Chandigarh* (1969), *The Day in Shadow* (1971), *A Voice for Freedom* (1977), *Plans for Departure* (1985), and *Mistaken Identity* (1988). She received the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1986 for her novel *Rich Like Us* (1985).

### 5. THIS TIME OF MORNING (1965)

*This Time of Morning* is set in post-independence India and focuses on women's lives in a society going through change. The story is set in New Delhi; it shows how female characters deal with social expectations and pressures of marriage. The novel opens by describing India's political landscape, highlighting the conflicts and power struggles within the new ruling class. Characters like Rashmi and Nita represent modern women who refuse to accept traditional roles that keep



them submissive. They challenge male dominance and rigid social norms while striving for independence and self-identity. Through these characters, Sahgal portrays the emergence of a new kind of woman who resists oppression and seeks freedom at different stages of her life. Overall, it shows the difficulties women face in post-independence India while trying to achieve independence and dignity in a changing society.

#### ● Rashmi:

Rashmi is the central character in the novel, who represents a strong, independent woman in a male-dominated society. Her parents, Mira and Kailas, belong to the older generation. Mira reflects the traditional view that a woman's life is centred on being a good wife and mother, and she perceives her success by how well she cares for her family. In contrast, Rashmi represents the struggles and hopes of women after independence. She wants freedom and a sense of her own identity. Her marital life with Dalip is unhappy and becomes suffocated, and she feels trapped in it. Entrapped in social biases and dominated by cultural norms that Hindu marriage ties are sacred, the compulsion is "to endure, reconcile and preserve, no matter at what cost" (Sahgal 13). But with a bold decision to end her mental suffering and distress, Rashmi comes out of this oppressive orbit of marriage and returns to her father's home. She chooses divorce so she can break free from the expectations placed on women in marriage. In the end, she leaves the relationship, goes back to her parents' home, and accepts the failure of her marriage. By rejecting marriage, her character represents a modern and independent way of thinking about her life.

Rashmi avoids talking about her decision to divorce with her parents or even with Rakesh and Neil, though she is close to them. She chooses to end her marriage on her own, without taking anyone's advice. "A part of her had married a man, loved him, given herself to the task of making a home, and suffered the wilderness that only two mismatched people could create. But there was a self that had stood free from all this, the unsundered core of her, the waiting, watching, guardian spirit that belonged to no man" (ibid 170). This line shows Rashmi's inner struggle and how she slowly understands herself. Her marital life is filled with emotional complexities, where social expectations clash with the individual freedom of women. Words like "waiting," "watching," and "guardian spirit" show her strength and courage. She refuses to be defined by any man or by society's rules. Her search for freedom and identity reflects the rise of a modern woman who wants to live on her own terms.

Thus, the institution of marriage in Indian society, as shown in the novel, is not always a happy or equal relationship. It is often shaped by male-dominated values where women are expected to obey without question. In such a system, a woman's own wishes and identity are pushed aside for the sake of family and society. Rashmi's decision to leave her marriage is not just about escaping her problems but about saying no to these unfair expectations. She refuses to believe that suffering quietly is a woman's duty. By doing so, she questions the idea that marriage must be preserved at any cost. For her, marriage is not the only purpose of life; it should respect her self-identity and individuality. When she walks away, she takes control of her own life and shows that a woman's value does not depend on being married. Her action reflects a wider change, where women begin to stand up against injustice and try to live life on their own terms. Thus, Rashmi's journey through the novel shows a woman's search for freedom and real, meaningful relationships in a male-dominated society. She refuses to define herself only through marriage or men and chooses to leave an unhappy and mismatched relationship. Through Rashmi, Sahgal presents a woman's growing sense of freedom, who values honesty, understanding, trust, and respect in relationships instead of false expectations and selfishness.

#### ● Nita:

Nita is a significant female character in the novel. She is the young and pretty daughter of Mr and Mrs Narang. She is modern and well-educated, and lives life on her own terms without interference from anyone. Her lifestyle reflects Western influence, she drinks, smokes, dances, and attends late-night parties. She believes in enjoying life freely and rejects the traditional values imposed upon her by parents. Being confident and independent, she wants to build her own identity and find her individual place in society.

Nita is very sincere about her studies and career, so she decides not to get married at a young age. As she says "I don't marry till I'm forty-five" (ibid 40). Her dedication to improving herself in both her personal life and career represents the significance of women's empowerment through education and career advancement. This idea is a key part of feminist ideology. She wishes to have a job and earn her own money, so she asks her lover, Rakesh, to convince his parents and allow her to work. She says. "I don't want to marry at all just yet. Rakesh, do persuade Mummy and Daddy I should have a job" (ibid 41). Nita's feelings and the way she speaks to Rakesh clearly go against the social thinking



that expects women to marry early and only take care of the home. She refuses to follow the usual system where women depend on men for everything. She wants to grow as a person and have a career and financial freedom, instead of being limited to household duties. She is trying to live with self-respect and as an individual.

Nita's character shows that a person should have the freedom to make their own decisions and live life in their own way. Her thinking represents a new woman, who is trying to change social practices and create new individual identities in a rapidly changing society. As she says, "A job was never enough. A job led to money and freedom, and freedom demanded a flat of one's own, away from the prying eyes and inquisitive voices" (ibid 205). It represents her growing sense of self identity and individualism. She understands that a job is not just about working but about achieving financial independence. Her desire for independence is reflected as she moves away from depending on her family or husband, which was common in conservative societies. Economic self-sufficiency is a crucial step towards independence for a woman seeking to build her own identity beyond traditional roles. Through Nita, Sahgal shows how Western ideas influence Indian society. Nita seeks her own space and the freedom to make her own choices, which goes against traditional rules. She believes women should find happiness and succeed in their careers. She is determined to live life on her own terms, without pressure from family or society, showing her strong belief in independence.

Thus, through *This Time of Morning*, Sahgal presents her female characters as modern and aware individuals who try to find their own identity, voice, and freedom, both emotional and financial, in a deeply rooted patriarchal society. Sahgal portrays women's struggle between tradition and modern thinking. Rashmi's character represents a new kind of woman who moves beyond the usual roles of wife and mother and seeks independence. Her journey is about discovering herself and breaking the limits society places on her as a woman and a wife. Further, Nita is shown as an educated and independent woman who questions social traditions. She makes her own choices, putting her freedom, happiness, and career above what society expects. Her actions reflect a strong sense of self and a refusal to prescribe gender roles. Through these characters, Sahgal highlights women stepping out of the home and actively participating in society, shaping their own lives. This reflects her idea of a new generation of women who are brave enough to question and challenge a male-dominated system.

## 6. CONCLUSION:

Thus, Nayantara Sahgal's *This Time of Morning* shows marriage as an institution shaped by male-dominated traditions, while simultaneously being challenged by modern ideas like individuality, freedom, and self-expression. The characters like Rashmi and Nita represent a transition from quietly accepting social rules to challenging them. The novel situates women between tradition and modern thinking, where their desire to be independent often clashes with society's expectations of marriage, duty, and obedience.

Sahgal presents marriage not as a harmonious institution but as one filled with conflict, imbalance, inequality, and dissatisfaction. In the novel, traditional marriage is shown as restrictive, where women are expected to sacrifice their individuality and follow societal norms. Rashmi's unhappy marital life reflects how marriage often prioritises duty over emotional fulfilment. At the same time, emerging modern values challenge this structure. Nita, for instance, questions arranged marriage and resists being tied down before becoming independent. It lights on a broader social conflict between the older generation that values stability and obedience and the younger generation that seeks freedom, equality, and emotional satisfaction in relationships. Thus, marriage becomes a site of conflict where traditional practices clash with modern ideas for personal freedom and mutual understanding. Modernity in the novel is expressed through education, employment, city life, and changing perspectives toward relationships. Rashmi's and Nita's characters embody this shift as they seek self-identity beyond household roles. Nita represents premarital independence as she denies getting married at an early age and focuses on her career and personal growth. On the other hand, Rashmi represents post-marital awakening; she realises the limitations of her marriage and seeks a more meaningful life. Modernity allows these women to question traditions and authority, value emotional compatibility rather than social approval, and seek financial independence and assert their individuality. Women begin seeing themselves as independent individuals with their own desires and goals, rather than depending on men. In traditional setups, women are expected to stay only as wife and mothers, which limits their freedom and self-identity. Rashmi's decision to leave an unhappy and stressful marital life with Dalip shows her courage to break these limits. It symbolises her refusal to accept a system that values social image more than personal happiness. In the same way, Nita's refusal to follow fixed gender roles reflects a growing awareness among women, where they question patriarchal norms and strive to shape their own identity.



In *This Time of Morning*, Nayantara Sahgal explores marriage institutions in a society that is going through change. She reveals that traditional expectations in marriage often limit women, while modern ideas encourage them to be independent and aware of their own needs. Through characters like Rashmi and Nita, she portrays women who make their own choices, question unfair man made laws, and seek freedom in both their personal and social sphere. The novel reflects a changing Indian society, where women try to build their own identity and stand against long-held patriarchal beliefs.

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