

Emerging New Woman in Nayantara Sahgal's *The Day in Shadow*

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Abstract: *The Day in Shadow* (1971) of Nayantara Sahgal stresses the need to re-examine and revitalize the Indian social, ethical and religious conventions and attitudes towards marriage. The orthodox approach which demands submission of the wife to the unquestionable authority of her husband often causes much misery and victimization. This paper explores that woman, who belongs to the “sphere of intense, sharpened sensibility,” can no longer accept the victimization and the suppression unquestioningly as her destiny. Rejecting inequality and male-chauvinism, she demands a humane and compassionate approach to marriage based on love, care, involvement, honesty equality and free communication.

Keywords: Identity, Patriarchal, Suppression, Inequality

Introduction: *The Day in Shadow* is the story of a woman's attempt to establish her personhood. Simrit, its protagonist, is an educated woman, a professional writer, and yet she allows her self-image to be battered by Som's (her husband) patriarchal domination. She gathers up the courage to leave him only when he himself refuses to continue with a failed marriage. The divorce has actually taken place as the novel begins and with divorce comes the actual realization of the misery, the realization of the misery, the economic hardships, the feeling of loneliness and a score of other existential problems for Simrit because she signs the Consent Terms of her divorce settlement without understanding their implications. Having been divorced, she turns to Raj, not to her own inner resources, to achieve selfhood. Ironically, the person upon whom she depends for mental and emotional sustenance displays, in spite of his aggressive feminist sentiments, the same male condescension and the same patriarchal impulses that had shaped Som's behavior towards her. The equilibrium that she achieves at the end of the novel is, then, all too probably a spurious one.

The novel examines and stresses the urban, affluent class milieu in a metropolitan situation, only to bring home an equally grim reality of Indian women's plight. Simrit had herself chosen Som, charmed by “his flash”, contrasting so vividly with her solitary book-loving childhood. She had felt that “Som has colour and life and action” (Sahgal 12). But the glitter of Som's personality had misguided Simrit, as she later realizes the tragic mistake:

They had got on easily enough on the surface, and that had created a game of its own in which intensity, depth and devotion were never brought into play at all, nor was a partnership. Som the rougher element had led. Not that she had wanted to lead only to be, though that would have meant a battle-and she had never been prepared to fight. (Sahgal 4)

Simrit belongs to the sphere of intense, sharpened sensibility. She is a sensitive and compassionate woman, who expects Som to foster an intimate relationship based on love, involvement, care, equality, honesty, understanding and free communication. For Som, however, Simrit is only a valuable possession and he expects her to conform to his ideal of subdued womanhood. Som dominates Simrit completely; so much so that she has no say in the ordinary decisions of the household. Som's world of commerce, ambition and power has no room for softer moral norms, values and friendships. Simrit, on the other hand, is a scholarly woman who values 'scholarship ethical' integrity, and most significantly decent human relations. The gulf between the discordant values increasingly widens, as Som is caught up in "a spiraling mania for affluence" (Sahgal87). All his relationships are governed by material considerations motivated by a sense of ruthless ambition which brooks no obstruction. He has no qualms about changing job and discarding even close friends such as Lalaji on his way to the top. Som's growing obsession with power and possession disgusts Simrit. Being a sensitive being she longs for a world whose texture is kindly and soft and therefore feels isolated in Som's world:

The talk was the missing link between her son and Som, between her and his world. She had a farming need for talk. She was driven to a quiet desperation for want of it. Good talk about books. Events, ideas, people. (Sahgal 93)

Som lives in the male-centered world, and his pride of procreation is concentrated only on his son Brij. Simrit is pained to find the daughters being discriminated by Som. Even with Brij, Som substitutes money for affection, care and interest. But Som is already attuned to the palliatives of the money world and has only these to offer. To him, however, it is Simrit who is abnormal. For his own point of view, Som finds himself a good husband as he has earned so much money. Simrit yearns to get a warm cold atmosphere where there is some goal beyond self-advancement. Som, however, fails even to understand Simrit's grief and expectation. He feels his duty to his wife is over, just by providing a "wonderful life" of affluence and luxury. He is so absorbed in his own success that he fails to notice Simrit's gradual withdrawal from his world of fluctuating loyalties and commerce. The dissonance in their relationship casts its shadow on their sexual relationship too. Simrit wants the physical act to be infused with the emotional involvement, whereas for Som it is merely a physical act. Simrit stays excluded and rebellious as she feels that sex cannot be isolated from the rest of life. Som, however, lacks the tenderness to respond sensitively to her needs. Friendly, involving and free relationships with Simrit are "quite beyond" he and this eventually results in the "systematic cutting off" (Sahgal97). Simrit gets terribly shaken when Som abruptly warns her that one week should give her enough time to decide what she wants to

do: “get on with a normal life or finish this farce once and for all” (Sahgal 97). The “ultimatum” stuns her. She knows intuitively that he had settled matter, already complete without her, on his way to a new chapter. (Sahgal 98)

Legally speaking, it was true that “the only thing you could get without a hitch was a divorce” (Sahgal 45), yet in the society, age-old perceptions and attitudes regarding women’s independent identity have not changed. Legal provisions are no solace, nor compensation for social frigidity. Simrit, therefore “feels uprooted and abandoned in a husband-centered world.” The divorce settlement continues to weigh heavily on her, not only in social-economic but in psychological terms too:

The issue of marriage could be dissolved by human acts, but its anatomy went on and on. And skeletons could endure for a million years. Just living together daily routine produced that uncanny durability. It made the question of whether one had loved or not, been loved or not, been the transgressed against trivial by comparison. (Sahgal 64)

It seems Simrit herself is unable to transcend the middle-class sensibility ingrained over time in Indian women. Even after the divorce, Som manages to pin down Simrit in the role of a victim by way of divorce settlement called Consent Terms. It puts shares of some companies in the name of Brij with Simrit as his guardian, thereby compelling her to pay the heavy taxes till Brij attains adulthood. The heavy tax payments are an attempt to enslave her in every way, and divorce instead of ushering in a new beginning confirms a confrontation with the age-old orthodox views regarding the status of woman. Simrit realizes that the heavy tax payments are not a mistake or an oversight but Som’s way of punishing her.

Som is clever enough to tell Brij about the tax problem from his point of view before Simrit can do it and thus forestalls any understanding from that quarter. All her attempts to make others see the divorce settlement from her point of view fail because people do not have any sympathy for a woman seeking freedom and fulfillment. Raj, however, is outraged by the ruthless pinning down. Recovering from bewilderment and emotional trauma of divorce, Simrit struggles to build a new life for herself and her children. She meets Raj, a sincere and nice bachelor and Member of Parliament. The broad sympathies and humane attitude of Raj attract her steadily. He helps Simrit regain her equilibrium, both emotional and intellectual. Raj is cast in entirely different mould than Som. Unlike Som, and like Simrit, Raj values tremendously the human values and humane response to life. As Jasbir Jain quotes on Raj’s personality “Raj himself draws his strength not from his position or his religion but from his awareness of himself and others as human beings, from his honesty of purpose and sincerity of belief” (45). Raj has the capacity to be involved in causes but not entirely and not in the hope of a reward or a reputation but purely out of his conviction. Involvement to him is the real meaning of the act of

living. Raj, like Rakesh in *This Time of Morning* and Vishal in *Storm In Chandigarh*, is a man with his faith in modern liberal humanism.

Simrit draws on Raj's strength and understanding to stand upright and alive once again. She feels that Raj is "the only stable element in the emotional debris of her new world" (Sahgal 16). Raj explains to the ignorant Simrit the quibbling rigmarole of the legal terms of the document and how it "trapped and maimed her" (Sahgal 40). Raj makes her realize that the document has let her in for a slow butchery for as long as she lives. He jolts Simrit out of the crippling passivity. The document infuriates him every time he thinks of it and is "burned" into his brain. Raj's deep concern with tax problem surprises even Simrit. Raj explains: "And have not you ever known anyone who acted purely out of conviction? Without hopes of reward, or honour or even understanding?" (Sahgal 41).

The relationship which begins as a friendly companionship soon blooms into a strong relationship involving both of them deeply. Raj feels that his relationship with Simrit has "to be on a long strong basis" (Sahgal 159) and "no games of any sort" (Sahgal 159). Raj prefers Simrit, as she appreciates him as "the guardian of a full-blown life, lived, scared and experienced" (Sahgal 160). Simrit is fascinated by the "ease and range of movement that came of walking, speaking and living with open naturalness" (Sahgal 106). Significantly Raj values Simrit as an individual, not as a possession, "It was Simrit for her he wanted, Simrit to forsake her shadows and begin to live" (Sahgal 167).

Raj encourages Simrit to start living with renewed zest. Nayantara Sahgal portrays the physical love of Simrit and Raj frankly and freely. When both Raj and Simrit are sure of the deep bond of intimacy and love, their relationship is consummated: to them, physical love comes naturally and spontaneously with the reassurance "that the bond between them was reliable" (Sahgal 184). Simrit feels, "From the beginning, they had been in step, lovers from another life, forging an intimacy deeper than any she had ever known" (Sahgal 206).

Raj too feels total tranquility. Confident of their intimacy, compatibility, and love for each other, Raj and Simrit decide to marry in the near future. Som strikes once again as he contacts Simrit for some changes in the consent terms. Simrit, however, is no longer "the unsuspecting unresisting victim" as she sees through the "another form of execution" (Sahgal 221) and certainly not a reprieve. Simrit realizes that "after all these years to find Som was a man without pity or concern, or even real responsibility" (Sahgal 221). Raj proposes marriage to Simrit, knowing too well that she has hordes of children and a monstrous tax problem. To him, Simrit, an uprooted mother of several children is essential "a woman of culture" (Sahgal 122).

What concerns Nayantara Sahgal most is the need for a mature approach to marriage, the need to nurture it with love and care and candour. The relationship of Raj and Simrit is grounded in sympathy and

understanding, human communication and friendship, rather than bestial sensuality and cruel insensitivity. It seems that Nayantara not only wishes to depict this type of world but also prescribes it as the only sane and sensible alternative to the machinist's world of power, atrocities and greed. Tara Ali Baig comments on *The Day in Shadow*. "*The Day in Shadow* is the study of the deadly struggle that accompanies Indian woman to liberate herself from the moral and social pressures that combine with economic dependence to exercise a crippling power over middle women is marked with intense indignation as well as sensitivity and compassion" (130). Clearly, the exploitation she talks of is not an obvious, recognizable form of physical exploitation against which most people will naturally raise a cry, but a subtle and inhuman form of exploitation, a sort of beating where "blood and bruises don't show" (Sahgal 187).

The indignation of the author at Simrit's helplessness and the appalling situation is clear in when she says that "divorce for women-nature is like a sin." Simrit herself is able to transcend the middle-class sensibility of Indian woman ingrained over time, with great difficulty and introspection and with Raj's tremendous help. Interestingly, however, a critic, Irene Gilbert, comments that "perhaps it is only a difference of degree, but many independent women in the west will explain their situation very similar" (187). Ultimately, however, Simrit does emerge as an individual asserting her distinct identity but she also realizes the limits of isolated individual efforts in a nefarious social web: "Life was never long enough to overthrow all the tyrants" (Sahgal 236). However, she hopes: "Maybe the question would be different in the twenty-first century" (Sahgal 6).

Thus the woman-as-victim motif-which includes not just Simrit but also Pixie, a young widow, who is forced to submit to Sumer Singh's sexual exploitation and Shaila, Raj's erstwhile girlfriend who has to opt out of their relationship because of societal pressures and learns to believe it never existed--is an image of the exploitation inherent in the patriarchal society. Sahgal's novel is, moreover, a characteristically feminine novel. Victimization and survival are thus the basic themes of women's fiction all over the world. They are an intrinsic part of the feminine psyche and reveal themselves in women's writing even if the authors do not directly engage in an open critique of a patriarchal society or present the woman's attempt to achieve selfhood. Certainly, *The Day in Shadow* shows at least one woman clearly repudiating her role of victim and believing that she has achieved autonomy.

Simrit had married Som because he had contrasted "so vividly with her solitary book-loving childhood. Som was colour and life and action" (Sahgal 4). As she begins to realize how his very vividness has destroyed her selfhood, she tries at first to compromise, and they create a game in which there is no intensity, depth, devotions or partnership. Such games are finally self-defeating, and Simrit has to decide to terminate the relationship in order to regain autonomy. In the end, she decides to establish the relationship with Raj. Whereas Som and Simrit had different role expectations from each other, neither Raj nor Simrit expect each other to act according to set roles. This relationship is therefore likely to last.

Conclusion: Nayantara Sahgal successfully presents in her novel the dilemma of a modern woman. The protagonist of the novel rejects the existing traditions and social set-up. She becomes more conscious of her emotional needs and strives for self-fulfillment. She attempts to live a more liberal and unconventional way of life. However, she is trapped and oppressed because of her dependence on her husband. Sahgal has truly shown the hardships and sufferings involved in fighting against an established order. She tries to attain her individuality within the framework of society. Sahgal believes that women should try to understand and realize herself as a human being and not just as an appendage to some male life. Simrit in *The Day In Shadow* really emerges as a new woman who does not want to compromise with her uniqueness and identity.

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