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Emancipation and Freedom for Women: The Recurring Idea in Nayantara Sahgal's *The Day in Shadow*

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Abstract:

Nayantra Sahgal is one of the prolific Indian fictionists in English whose writings deal mainly with the politics and women striving hard against the tyranny and injustice imposed upon them in the name of tradition and culture. Sahgal in her writings frames the absolute right of freedom for women in many of her characters such as Simrit in *The Day in Shadow*, Saroj in *Storm in Chandigarh* and Rashmi in *This Time of Morning*. Many similarities are shared by women in Sahgal's novels. They are disillusioned by their selfish better halves and society as a whole. They are also strong enough in waging a war against the traditional image that is fabricated for them by the male dominant society. This paper highlights the feministic perspective of the writer who strives hard for the emancipation and identity of women in the society.

She invites our thinking towards some serious issues like divorce, patriarchal setup, The Hindu Marriage Act etc. so that these evils may get eradicated from the society. Sahgal conveys through her fiction that these traditional fabrications are not innocent. As a matter of fact, Sahgal's fiction highlights political and social milieu of Indian society with an impact of intense sensibility showing her genre and style as true representation of Indian English Fiction of the twentieth century. In this paper an attempt has been made to critically analyze Sahgal's *The Day in Shadow* in which she criticizes the male dominant society and the oppression and injustice faced by the women in this patriarchal Indian society. Divorce is the focal point in the novel as in the light of this very issue Sahgal raises some important issues like woman's emancipation, Hindu Marriage Act and the sincerity in man-woman relationship. This novel does have some autobiographical elements in it as it resembles a lot with the author's personal life.

Keywords: Divorce, Woman's Emancipation, Search for Identity, Male Dominance, Fictionalised Autobiography, Man-Woman Relationship. Tradition and Modernity, Sex and Marriage

Introduction:

The novel *The Day in Shadow* was composed in the year 1971 and is recognized as one of her best works. It reflects much of the Sahgal's stand on divorce and traditional Hindu society's demeanour towards marriage and womanhood. Sahgal's personal concerns and the spirit of feminism take precedence over politics in the novel. Sahgal in this novel emphasizes on the idea that a happy marriage depends upon a reciprocation and mutual companionship. A marriage in which woman is considered as a sex toy and is denied individual emancipation is inhumane and sinister. Sahgal in one of her articles expresses similar kind of feeling. She talks about her distressed and torturous marriage with her first husband Gautam and writes:

.....Marriage unsettled me disastrously. For the first time I came across the shocking assumption of inequality. A man's ego and ambition, I learned, must be served first. In case of conflict, the man's will and desires must prevail. (1977 Point of View)

Sahgal's *The Day in Shadow* actually describes the struggle of Indian woman confronting the burden of a brutal divorce settlement and the pain and distress she experiences in the hands of cruel and unfair male-dominated Indian society. This novel is a fine example of the female literary tradition in Indian English literature. Sahgal has successfully depicted the problem of divorce and disintegration of the marriage in a typical Indian setting. Asnani thus depicts:

.....She stands for new morality, according to which a woman is not to be taken as a mere toy, an object of lust and momentary pleasure, but man's equal and honoured partner in word and deed, as against the inhuman, traditional postures. (1973 Asnani)

Ideology and Narrative:

The protagonist Simrit Raman, a writer is a divorcee and the novel shows the prejudice and hatred she confronts in a male dominant society. Novel elaborates the story of Simrit's distressed married life with her husband Som and the unpleasant situation she confronts after her divorce. As a young unmarried woman Simrit gets attracted to Som's personality and hence marries him. But after marriage she finds that her husband Som is totally a different person who is interested in worldly affairs and busy in money making. He is more intended towards the materialistic luxuries. In this regard, Jasbir Jain speaks off:

.....Simrit longs for communication and understanding which is unable to find in Som's world of ambition and money. Simrit is finally estranged not by Som's rough-sod methods but by his growing obsession with power and possession, as she is caught up in spiralling mania of affluence. (1978 Jain)

Som's relationship with Simrit is based more on his need for sexual gratification rather than emotion and love. He never showed the feeling of love and companionship to Simrit. Nayantara writes:

.....Som stayed cut off from her. Her usefulness to him has never extended to areas of the mind. (77)

For Som, sex is just a means of satisfying her compelling urgency. But for Simrit sex is something different and it has its own laws. Following piece of text elaborates Simrit's attitude to sex and it also depicts writer's views on sex in marriage:

.....Sex had its own visions too_ of tenderness, of humour, of more than a physical act. Sex could be an argument or a problem shared. (90)

Simrit realizes that her relationship with her husband doesn't share any sense of mutual partnership. It lacks intensity, sincerity, love and devotion as it is dominated by materialistic luxuries and rougher elements of her husband's demeanour. *Simrit* feels suffocated and dejected in the materialistic and male dominant world of *Som*, which finally results in a mutual divorce.

After her divorce, she meets with an idealistic politician Raj Garg a Member of Parliament and grows closer to him. She feels attracted towards him because of his human concerns he shows to her, unlike her husband who believes in materialist luxuries and money making above all. The basic reason for which Raj Garg wants to be with *Simrit* is the desire to help her out of the tax problem inflicted upon her by her ex-husband. The mutual attraction between them is not primarily sexual. The sign of physical attraction between Raj Garg and *Simrit* begins to appear only after *Simrit* realizes that her relationship with Raj Garg is genuine and trust worthy. Shayam M Asnani comments on the relationship between Raj Garg and *Simrit* and states:

....the personal world of Raj and *Simrit* [is] grounded in sympathy and understanding human communication and friendship, rather than bestial sensuality and cruel insensitivity. (1973 Asnani)

In a way Sahgal strongly suggests that marriage is not just sexual relationship, it means friendship on equal terms, she entreats for a basic honesty in relationships whether they are between man and woman or the ruler and the ruled. Twinkle B. Manavar writes:"

....The central preoccupation of Sahgal's novel is the suffering caused to woman in the prison-house of love-less marriage and her suffering when she makes a break way. She adopts an interesting method of creating her characters in the novel in order to promote her theme of women's suppression a revolt in the socio-political set up in modern India. (Twinkle B, Manavar)

In the novel the writer stresses upon the humanistic values and honesty in a relationship rather than having physical love in marriage. Ram Krishan an old friend of Raj's father seems to be representing Sahgal's point of view when he says;

.....Love may be electric, but as time passed....It was not needed by day there was nothing in the world stronger than friendship. (182)

It conveys that relationship in marriage is a matter of quality and culture. Physical attraction is just a part of it but as far as the relationship in marriage is concerned it is entertained both by the quality and the culture. The writer wants from the society a kind of relationship that is shared by Raj and *Simrit*.

Divorce is the central point in *The Day in Shadow*. Sahgal throws light on some certain issues on *Simrit's* divorce like marital relationships, The Hindu Marriage Act and woman's

freedom. Sahgal tries to prove that in a patriarchal society The Hindu Marriage Act has proved to be ridiculous and is against woman's emancipation. Simrit had divorced not because she is against the marriage institutions but because of Som's unbearable behaviour. Neena Arora thus writes

.....Nayantara Sahgal does not "propagate a separate 'female world' but envisions an organised whole world blending female virtues, morality and values with male culture so as to save it from catastrophe and doom.

(1991 Neena Arora)

Sahgal suggests through the story of Simrit's divorce that in the 20th century the talk of woman's freedom and emancipation is an illusion. The Hindu Marriage Act, that fundamentally aims to prevent the atrocities and injustice being done to women by men, is only an absurdity. Divorce gives no reprieve to woman. It instead adds to her problems and hurdles. Ram Krishan, a friend of Raj speaks about the injustice inflicted upon Simrit by Som through her brutal divorce and says:

.....the unspoken creed even of war not to bomb what need to be bombarded, not to go on bombing after the target has been hit. (178)

He further says:

....A woman can apparently still be used as a convenience for tax purpose by her husband even after he has divorced her. In any other country it would be indefensible and outrageous. No court would have looked at any document that expected a woman to pay out of her only earnings as a subsidy for her husband. The whole idea would have been preposterous. (168)

Nayantara Sahgal talks about the problem inheritance in the male-dominant society of India. She points out that this problem of inheritance has deep roots in the Indian society and it affects inter-personal relationships in several ways. The central point, on which the writer invites our thinking, is that the custom and tradition of inheritance in India favours the superiority of man over woman, of the mighty over the weak. She thinks that this psyche of Indians has become a part of their instinctive behaviour which carries on from generation to generation. The writer criticizes the prevalent Indian traditional fabrications of inheritance as it favours the male and thus encourages the gender discrimination. In the novel as per the terms and conditions of the divorce Simrit is not entitled to touch or transfer corpus of the shares, which are presently in her name. Major share of the corpus that is Rs 5 lac will be given to their male child, Brij and the rest of it to their daughters. Brij is symbolic of the ancient male prerogative as he exercises "unconscious superiority" over his two sisters. He too like his father Som believes in male dominance and does not hesitate to beat and scold up his sisters on slightest provocation. Simrit is distressed at the violence inclined behaviour of Brij, because she herself believes in non-violence.

Sahgal's narrative method in this novel turns out to be very experienced and mature. She narrates the whole story as an omniscient narrator. She elaborates the story of Simrit's marriage and ensuing divorce with objectivity. In nutshell we can say that this novel emphasizes on the woman's emancipation and freedom in the male dominant society where preference is given more to the men. Moreover it also talks about the divorce which again is a

very important issue in the present world. This novel can also be called as a fictionalized autobiography as Sahgal herself was a divorcee and a writer like Simrit Raman of the novel. And the novel casts clear reflection on the personal experiences of the writer. In the novel the predicament of Simrit symbolizes Nayanantara Sahgal's own traumatic experiences of divorce from her husband, Gautam Sahgal. The writer herself states that in *The Day in Shadow*:
.....I tried to figure out something that had happened to me_the shattering experiences of divorce. There are things that will never be understood until they are written. But writing helps the process. So Simrit turned out to some extent like me, even to being a writer and very stupid about practical matters. (1978 Jain)

After Sahgal's divorce from her husband, she developed intimacy with Mangat Rai, an Indian Civil Services Officer. Nayanantara's intimate relationship with him was based on mutual companionship and human concerns for each other. Her relationship with Mangat Rai was not a sign of meagreness as a woman it was rather treated on equal terms. She loves her self-respect and her own identity and individuality. Her concern for her identity and individuality is reflected very neatly in one of her personal letters she wrote to Mangat Rai in 1965. In the letter she makes her remember about a dinner party where she and her ex-husband, Gautam got involved in a discourse over the subject of rape and violence. She writes in the letter:
.....Anyway, Gautam came up with, "what do you do if someone rapes your wife's mind?" so I said, "if she cooperates, and enjoys it, then it isn't a rape. "And I wonder if he means you have raped my mind I don't find the suggestion very flattering for surely I have a mind of my own and am not rapeable material, nor do I think you fancy this approach to body and mind. (1994 Kali)

The novel deals with two facets a woman's life. Firstly the bitter experiences of marriage and secondly the situation after divorce. The divorce provides a link between these two different facets of a woman's life. And thus divorce becomes a focal point of the writer's philosophy in the novel. Keeping in line with this overall design of the plot, the story continues to shift between present and past or vice versa. However despite the ups and downs Nayanantara Sahgal shows a laudable sense of clarity and lucidity in her narration.

Nayanantara Sahgal's narration in *The Day in Shadow* clearly shows a continuous relation among her three important points of view: language, inheritance and personal relationship. Language acts as an important theme in the story of novel. Its presence or absence has perceptible effects on inheritance and interpersonal relationship, which are two of the vital issues the writer has taken into consideration in her novel. The lack of "language" or "talk" affects the relationship between Som and Simrit. It is wholly responsible for their divorce. In fact Som doesn't know the way to talk whereas Simrit is in quiet depression for want of it. The lack of communication results into the serious differences between Som and Simrit which eventually demolish their marital relationship. Sahgal personifies marriage as a rich heritage of Indian culture and tradition. While talking about the beauty of Indian geography Simrit tells Raj Garg that India has rich heritage, which needs pruning by giving human expression to it. She says that India's geographical beauty is:

.....a great objective inheritance unbegun with unending with its cycles of steady passionless renewal, but someone had to turn it into language. (36)

Metaphorically her views indicate a close link between language and inheritance. This metaphor strongly suggests that under the existing situations India is under shadow as its past rich inheritance is fabricated and blurred by the people who believe more in materialistic power rather than human values and concerns of love, devotion, sympathy and companionship. There India's rich heritage whether it is social, religious or cultural needs to be given humanistic expression.

Conclusion:

To conclude it can be emphasized that in the novel *The Day in Shadow*, Nayantara Sahgal's approach in presenting her ideas is fictionally very creative and artistically convincing. She raises some important issues of Indian society to make people aware about the fact that the traditional fabrications have blurred the real facet of the Indian society. Nayantara Sahgal in this novel uses her language very carefully to create the effect of reminiscence, flashback and retrospection. Occasional use of interior dialogues, exchange of confidences and direct comments add to the intensity and depth of thought and passion. She is a conscious writer who seems to be struggling hard for the freedom and emancipation of woman especially in the patriarchal Indian society. Nayantara has undoubtedly made the reading emotionally intense and intellectually interesting. She writes about herself:

"I have a very strong emotional as well as intellectual attachment to my roots.....I have certainly been plagued with wondering from time to time why I was born and what I am doing here and why I haven't had to worry about my next meal when millions live lives of anxiety and drudgery. And then there is the problem of evil and pain. At times all that abstract conjecture has become very personal, with the need to atone for the terrible things people do to each other. Some of these matters fell into place when I gave up the struggle to be an atheist. Atheism or agnosticism is my general family background but I am a believer to the marrow of my bones and much has become clearer to me since I faced the fact."

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