

A Feminist Study of Nayantara Sahgal's Political Novel, 'The Day in Shadow'

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ABSTRACT

The postcolonial Indian Writing in English has witnessed the emergence of women writers with feminist leanings and gender sensitive conceptualization. The socio-political developments in the country have been viewed from feminist consciousness in their writings. Nayantara Sahgal is one of the celebrated feminist political novelists in Indian Writing in English today. Her rich political lineage and her western education have moulded her into a feminist author with a thorough modern outlook. Political novel writing is her forte. Liberty and freedom are the recurrent motifs in her novels. Through her novels, Sahgal attacks the age old discrimination, victimization, exploitation and the gender based injustice against women in the male chauvinistic society. She takes up the political developments in the post-independence era in India juxtaposing them with the social themes. The upper class socio-political milieu, with all types of politicians, bureaucrats, business people, and men and women of upper class society, is the major background in her novels. Sahgal's prime concern is humanity. She demands equality for her female characters on par with men. Sahgal questions the viability of those practices and customs which subjugate and exploit women in the name of culture and tradition. For the present analysis Sahgal's political novel The Day in Shadow is taken up. Simrit, a middle-aged, divorced, a mother of many children and a writer of considerable reputation, is the lead character in the novel. Simrit's divorce settlement with her ex-husband Som and its far reaching financial constraints form the core of the action in the novel. In her conflict and struggle to come out of the cunning ruse and trap set by Som, Simrit is assisted by Raj, an M.P. and Ram Krishan, a follower of Gandhian philosophy. The political side of the novel is represented by Sumer Singh, a self-centred, power-mongering crafty politician. Though, no definitive conclusion is advanced at the end, the novel offers a ray of hope that the darkness that has set in the political sphere in general and in the life of Simrit in particular is going to be cleared up in the days to come.

Keywords: *constraints, exploitation, feminist, financial, male-chauvinist, Simrit*

The prominence of any society depends on the place given to its women. Since the hoary past, women occupied worthy and respectful positions in ancient India. Indian scriptures and religious texts bestowed women high stature. Married men used to carry out religious and culture specific ceremonies along with their wives. However, a drastic change took place during the consecutive foreign rules in India. Women were denied their individual

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liberty and right to equality with men. The headway achieved in the fields of virtuousness and knowledge should usher in the wellbeing and prosperity of the society and humanity at large. The sensual gratification is subordinate to that of rational indulgence. All the human beings have the requisite faculties to assume the state of being enlightened and refined virtuously and sagaciously. When the association of men and women matter, it shouldn't be on the lines of confrontation. The liaison of both the sexes should not reflect the attitude of seeking to subdue each other. J. S. Mill opines, "It ought to be replaced by a principle of perfect equality, admitting no power or privilege on one side, disability on the other" (1).

Since ages, a women have been considered feeble and a dependent on any of the male family member. The class-conscious societal and stratified religious views about gender inequality between men and women always proffer a prototype role to a woman as a virtuous daughter, wife and mother based on the theory of "biological determinism". This orthodox view about women has been a historical vista which believes in the inequality of women which endorsed the theory that "might was right". The customary perception pronounces that women are obviously ensnared in the purpose of reproductive process and naturally cannot discharge socio-religious responsibilities on par with their male counterparts. R. J. Kalpana construes that "The feminist syllogism: women are naturally trapped in the childbearing function and the liberation of women depends on their being freed from this trap" (9). This "powerless responsibility" of women is the weightiest of all other social incumbencies. It results in a great financial falling off and redundancy. Her emotions are uncared for since it is well thought-out that she has no other obligation than to nurture the children with empathy and wellbeing

The last century witnessed an urge for parallelism in the feminist writings across the globe. Numerous, incongruous behavioural patterns indicating individuality and a wide range of occurrences have been presented. Simon de Beauvoier's *Second Sex* and Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics* examine the conception of gender and the role of gender in repressing women. The prime purpose of the feminism is to initiate social change. The exponents of feminism want the role accorded to women should be prominent. This requires the attitude of patriarchy to be modified. Feminism envisages ideas and emotions as central and decisive in the lives of women. The feminist thinkers articulate that if women can construct their own identity, it would bravely lead to eradicate the gender disparities. T.M.J. Indra Mohan observes, "The whole idea of feminism revolves round only value based system...It aims at overcoming male hierarchy in the most profound sense and ask for, in a simple language, a treatment as an individual human being" (187).

The present paper is an attempt to look into how Nayantara Sahgal portrays the predicament of Indian women who are subjected to physical and psychological trauma in the social and political arenas in the name tradition and culture. Nayantara Sahgal is one of the prominent women novelists in Indian Writing in English in the post colonial India. Her high political family heritage has bestowed her with authenticity in her emergence as the most renowned socio-political novelist in the post-independence era. Her novels stand as the testimony for her adept depiction of upper class socio political realisms. Feminist perspective and political acumen are the predominant areas of writing in her novels. Most of her novels present the oppressed female lead characters that are denied of their basic individual liberty and freedom and their consequent struggle to tide over the domineering and humiliating attitudes of their male counterparts and assert their individuality by proclaiming their basic liberty and freedom.

For the present analysis, Nayantara Sahgal's fourth novel, *The Day in Shadow* (1971) is considered. The novel is a microscopic representation of the socio-political atmosphere with

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the political bigwigs, business people, bureaucrats, intellectuals, freelance writers, philosophers and others. It gives a symbolic view of the different sections of the Indian society. Raj, a Member of Parliament and a converted Christian and an Intellectual; Ram Krishan, a seasoned journalist and a liberal thinker; Simrit, a middle-aged, divorced woman and a mother of three children; Som, a smug business man and divorced husband of Simrit; Sumer Singh, a union cabinet Minister of Petroleum; Sardar Saheb, a veteran politician and others are the major characters we come across in the novel. With a wide gamut of characters, Sahgal portrays various human emotions, intentions of the politicians, business people and bureaucrats of Delhi.

The novel is about the debilitating effects inflicted on the psyche of a hapless woman due to the divorce settlement which she enters with her smug and self-centred ex-husband. Simrit is the protagonist of the novel. With the grit of character and strong undaunted will, she comes out from the shadows of life seeking happiness. The novel is about the brutal disclosure of what it would be like with a victimized woman, caught in the trap of inhuman divorce settlement with far-reaching financial implications. The marriage of Som Raman and Simrit becomes a debacle due to the nonchalant attitude of Som. The novel also depicts the story of Raj Garg, an independent Member of Parliament. On the political front, the novel is the story of Delhi with the budding politicians who have done away with the ideology of Gandhi but want to identify themselves with the world of Gandhi, lest they can't go on without it. The divorce agreement of Simrit represents the personal tragedy while the nation is at critical juncture at the hands of the self-centred politicians.

The novel depicts many themes such as love, liberty, political contrives, moves and countermoves, ethics in both personal and public lives. Of all, the resistance and conflicts in the life of Simrit and her determination to fight back and live again against the emotional and economic burden ensuing out of her signing a 'barbarous document' called the "Consent Terms" of her divorce agreement with her husband Som. Som, in a very calculated move, tricks Simrit to sign the terms of the cruel agreement. Som purchases shares worth rupees six lakhs by her name, to be acceded to their minor son Brij when he attains certain age. Until then Simrit has to pay the heavy tax though she is not entitled to receive the income they may produce. This is an act of Som meant to ruin his wife economically. It is plain that Som wants to deprive her of her little earnings by working as a freelance journalist. This brutal scheme indicates his lack of understanding of the aspirations of his wife and individuality. This makes Simrit resist and set a path for her and the kind of women who are subdued by men under similar circumstances. At this juncture of financial crisis and the disaster in marriage of Simrit, the novelist introduces the character of Raj, a middle-aged Christian convert and an incumbent M. P. to rescue Simrit from the mire into which she was forcibly hurled. It is Raj who instils courage in Simrit to face any eventuality and prevails upon her to assert her individuality. He involves himself in the problems of Simrit and condemns vehemently that the tax burden is intended to decimate her emotionally and economically. During the emotional crisis in Simrit's life, Raj becomes a constant source of persuasion to withstand the cruel game her ex-husband wants to play with her even after divorce. Raj condemns the monstrous divorce settlement which is connived to 'wipe' Simrit outright emotionally and economically. Condemning the whole excruciating plot, Raj comments, "The Consent Terms looked more and more like an outgrowth of Som's personality... The Consent Terms, he decided, were a sort of Hiroshima" (138). It is viewed as a change in the plot technique of Sahgal unlike her previous novels. Commenting on this Jasbir Jain points out, "...the crisis is already over when the story opens. Simrit and Som are already divorced and Simrit is trying to adjust to the aftermath of the divorce" (123).

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Sahgal makes Simrit opt to walk out from the marriage as a mark of her refusal to yield to the impudence of Som. The grit of her character is revealed by her moving out from her marital bond with Som, relinquishing the comfort of security supposed to be offered to a wife in marriage. By defying the audaciousness of Som, Simrit declines to acknowledge her position being an object of gratifying the bodily pleasures. Simrit doesn't want to play the role of a mere sex object. She wants to follow her intellectual pursuits and mark her identity as a strong-minded individual. Naturally, she cherishes the association of Raj, who is a staunch supporter of liberalism and individual freedom. His unbiased political views also attract the attention of Simrit. She is won over by Raj's logical and practical judgments.

Sahgal uses her personal experience of divorce to describe the divorce agreement of Simrit. She draws material from her own life and fictionalizes it in the present novel. After her divorce from her first husband Gautam Sahgal, Sahgal married Mangath Rai, a Christian ICS Officer. Similarly, Simrit is also victimized with an inhuman tax burden inflicted upon her by her ex-husband and wants to marry Raj with whose guidance she wants face the consequences of her divorce agreement. Simrit, who is denied the individual liberty in the early stages of marriage, wants to reassert herself by way of opting for divorce after many years of marriage. Ironically, when she took divorce from Mr. Sahgal legally, she was not free from the clutches of him. She was made to attach herself to him because of the conditions of divorce and separation. Sahgal's decision to marry a man of her choice was considered against the established system of marriage. As a result, Simrit's divorce with her first husband and her decision to live with Raj in the novel is seen as a reflection of Sahgal's shattered divorce experience. M. Rajeswar comments, "At the end of the travail, she turns her back on the "order" that is ordained for her by society and tradition and creates an "order" of things for herself" (91). Thus, this novel is considered autobiographical with its delineation of man-woman relationships.

Simrit's failure in marriage, her surfacing out from the ordeal of divorce settlement and consequent resolution to lead a life of independent individual is an assertion of freedom and identity. In Raj, she finds all those values she has been searching for in her marriage. Raj never fails to appreciate or ignore her and wants to discount her thoughts. Above it, he always acts as a mentor and guide to Simrit and makes her realize her uniqueness as an individual and regain her awareness of herself. It is Raj with his support that makes her strong and more matured. In contrast, Som has never allowed Simrit to think and act independently with his domineering and totalitarian attitude towards her. With his constant vetoing of whatever she does or think, she has lost her faculty of thinking and planning. Even in doing the trivial things in the house, Simrit has no freedom to exercise. In contrast, Raj helps Simrit to apply her mind and to do things for her own satisfaction. Raj feels that the religious hereditary i.e. Hinduism from which she hails is the basis for her sad state of developments in her life. Her liberal and docile attitude enrages Raj. He prevails upon her to forsake her passive acceptance and to act with some practical conviction. He expresses his utmost dismay to Simrit when he says, "What kind of marriage did you have anyway" (37). He exhorts her to come out of her moderate attitude to revolt against the conditions which victimize her. He says, "She (Simrit) simply could not go through life like this, letting other people's ambitions and actions overwhelm her" (38). This humane attitude and concern of Raj draws Simrit close to him. Som always wants to use her. Ironically Simrit has never protested at her being used by her husband. By projecting the male-chauvinistic dominance prevalent in the Hindu society, Sahgal tries to show up the unpleasant situation of all the Hindu women, irrespective of their social classes.

Simrit has never experienced exchange of ideas and emotions with Som where as Raj is a great source of communication and understanding. Raj can't accept the way Simrit has been trying

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to suppress her emotions and desires to avoid any kind of confrontation with her husband. He feels that this containment of emotions is the cause for downfall of any system. He insists on her convincingly, "It's time to break out and be avid, be *something*" (102). Raj raises pertinent questions about the viability of certain practises in the Hinduism. The dexterity in the narrative technique of Sahgal is evident with her addition of an elderly character of Ram Krishan, a Hindu and an ardent follower of Gandhian way of life. He is an editor of a weekly magazine. He gave up his law practice to become a lecturer when he was in his youth. He was a good friend of Raj's father. Ram Krishan is dynamic and forward looking gentleman. He always wants to make efforts for the benefaction of the society. However, the death of his wife has stripped some of his vigour and strength. Through Raj, Ram Krishan comes to know the predicament of Simrit and both of them want to help Simrit come out of the problems of her divorce agreement with her ex husband. Her present state reminds Ram Krishan those of refugees during the historical partition of the nation. He is full of sympathy for Simrit. He feels her ordeal is self-made. Her crisis in life makes Ram Krishan realize that it is high time he came out from the shock the death of his wife. He identifies his own troubles with those of Simrit and he begins to wonder "if what she had lost was replaceable" (175). He resolves at once not to allow Simrit to give up herself knowingly or unknowingly. This urge to help Simrit brings a kind of self actualization and rejuvenation in Simrit. He condemns the Consent Terms of Simrit's divorce agreement. He is agitated at the gross injustice and unreasonableness involved in her divorce agreement. He is shocked at the nastiness and brutality of the one who prepared the document. He felt, "It was a denial of a plain justice, the justice one dispensed even to a stranger" (178). He is resolute to challenge her marriage agreement in any court to make justice to Simrit as he perceives a clear maleficent intention Som to destroy Simrit. He advises her to live as if the horror doesn't hang over her head. Through the portrayal of the character of Ram Krishan, Sahgal tries to instil confidence and creates the hope for future.

Simrit's marriage with Som takes place on a dramatic note. Against the will of her parents and ignoring the words of warning of her friends, Simrit marries Som. Her parents take it serious to accept a man with business environment in their Brahmin family. Ironically, malleable and gentle hearted Simrit becomes a prey to the showy nature of Som. In the early days of their marriage, he was her whole world. With the passage of time, his true colours were revealed. He has never allowed the freedom to be herself. The more he has grown in career, the more intolerant he has become towards Simrit. She soon realizes that he has overcast her from learning anything. The novelist comments, "Som, the rougher element, had led" (4). Simrit's longing for an all-out total intercommunication with her Husband. But, Som's callous attitude towards her deepens the gap between them and she feels neglected. Som's view of a woman is that of sexual object and an instrument for reproduction and to look after children. His total conceited and self-centred approach makes him thoroughly materialistic. Money is everything to him and he measures the human relations with materialistic yardsticks. On the contrary, Simrit craves for consistency and deep rootedness in relationships.

Sahgal makes a candid attempt to expose the cruelty of people like Som by depicting the failure of marriage of Simrit. Sahgal also disapproves of the defects and gaps in the Indian judiciary. The laws seem to be more futile and absurd when it comes to the laws on divorce arrangements. Sahgal raises a serious objection to the phrase 'mutual consent'. She wonders when equals are not present, how it could be mutual. Simrit is shell shocked when she realizes that Som has deliberately trapped her into signing the merciless divorce settlement. She reflects, "Money had been part of the texture of her relationship with Som" (60). It is Raj who infuses courage and confidence in her and stirs her to endure the injustice and to come out as an individual and lead her life according to her own will. Raj appears a dependable companion who is a constant

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source of understanding and communication. For Raj, attraction is not just outwardly. He wonders at how she remains a true symbol for complete womanhood, despite being victimized. But, Raj's desire to help Simrit comes from his intolerance against injustice. He perceives in Simrit, despite her battered past, a strong character. He feels, "No one who did not could have moved bag and baggage from a whole past--with all those children" (38).

It is the narrative technique of Sahgal to make people like Raj and Ram Krishan extend every kind of moral support to carry the fight against the system which is put to misuse and to persecute the "unresisting, unsuspecting victim" like Simrit. Raj knows the impact of suffering and forbearance. Raj opines that it's the emotional 'butchery'. His support to Simrit is his avowed fight against the traditions which deny the basic liberty to individuals. Thus, Sahgal's feminist penchant is obvious in her bringing the anti-conformists like Simrit, Raj and Ram Krishan together to wage a fight against the established customs in the society which deprecate women. Sahgal's purpose of writing seems to project the theme of suppression of and their revolt in the postmodern times in India.

In the modern times, family dealings have undergone far-reaching ramifications and have become volatile instead of becoming stronger. Man-woman relationships have become complicated and fissiparous. The foremost premise of this novel is the broken human relations, and persistent ascendancy and the victimization of the wife by her husband despite continuous uproar for the deliverance from every kind of subjugation is felt consciously. The recurrent unfair treatment of women by men backfires and they tend to revolt against the social order which devalues them and want to establish their value system where their liberty and free will prevail. By making the female lead character resist silently and by narrating the mental agony of Simrit in the novel, Sahgal proves a steadfast feminist writer. Commenting on this aspect of the novel, S. K. Tikoo writes, "This novel thus marks the emergence of the new type of woman who can present her own terms on which harmonious and dignified family life may be possible now and in future" (239-240).

As discussed above, the character of Ram Krishan is significant in the novel as he fights against anything which is anti-social and anti-national. His ire against the repression of innocent women like Simrit with such a monstrous ploy as Consent Terms is more pronounced in his words to Raj, "The whole idea would have been preposterous" (168). He criticises the legal system which remains blind when naïve women are suppressed or deliberately rendered injustice. He contends how courts can ratify a document when an innocent woman signs it unknowingly. His role in making Simrit to fight against the unfairness is noteworthy and his efforts to liberate her from the trap set around her neck. He encouraged his deceased wife to defy the conventional way of life expected from a wife. He was instrumental in transforming a housekeeping wife to a affectionate friend. He strongly believes that the idea of underrating the pace a woman in the society as weird. He frowns at the idea of using a helpless woman as a 'convenient vehicle' for the tax burden. He avers, "This tax settlement could not be hung on a woman unless one accepted barbarism as daily event" (179). Ram Krishan wants to use journalism as means to garner support for the cause of Simrit and intends to make the issue a public issue through his columns in dailies. Motivated by the support of Raj and Ram Krishan, Simrit gets up for the battle and decides to face any possibilities in her struggle. At last, she chooses the course of action she wants take up. The novelist observes, "She felt free to choose what her life would be" (236).

The political aspect in the novel is added with the portrayal of the character of an opportunistic politician as Sumer Singh. Ram Krishan feels that the current political crisis in the country is

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due to the erosion of Gandhian values. Sumer Singh strikes murky dealings with Russia in sanctioning oil exploration in the J&K region. Raj and Ram Krishan want to help Simrit and want to change the terms of divorce agreement which victimize women. Though no problem is solved at the end of the novel, there is a ray of hope in the relationship of Simrit and Raj which is marked by understanding, sympathy and concern for each other. The title of the novel is taken from the historical speech of Pt. Nehru on the eve of India's independence, "even though the day be a cloudy one, it is a day after all" (*qtd. in* A. V. Krishna Rao, 65). Sahgal's experience in marriage is reflected the unpleasantness and mistreatment of Simrit by Som. The novelist wants to fight against the prejudices and humiliation of women in the bigoted social order through the leading role Simrit. Commenting on the viewpoint of Mrs. Sahgal, K. Mohit Ray and Rama Kundu observe, "Mrs. Sahgal presents through the protagonist Simrit the existential problems of women in a male-dominated society in a realistic manner". (94).

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