
FEMINIST MOTIF IN NAYANTARA SAHGAL'S THE DAY IN SHADOW

Dr. Sonia Rani*

The Day in Shadow is a masterpiece of Niyantara Sahgal. *In this novel the novelist images a world turning into reality where a wife is not being bamboozled into doing things as per the wishes of their husbands. She wants to have assertive women in all walks of life in place of docile and submissive women.* Simrit the protagonist of The Day in Shadow stands against the popular notion according to which “woman is considered more as a product of cultural norms and restraints rather than as a creature of nature.” Being a writer she tries to find meaning in her life, she urges for the satisfaction and feeling of contentment which she finds missing in her marriage. Unable to have any decision-making capacity in her marriage she tries to move away from the shadow of her husband in order to find herself, as she fails to understand her loneliness among all possible pleasures that money can buy. But as Simrit struggles to attain her social standing in the male dominated contemporary Indian society she finds herself amid the brutal divorce settlement inflicted on her by her so-called husband. The novel thus emphatically conveys the struggle of a woman to find her own self and her final attainment of the same. The reader witnesses an altogether different Simrit at the end of the novel from what she was at the beginning of the novel as the day in Shadow passes away and she comes out of it brilliantly. Mrs. Sahgal's novel affirms that contemporary Indian woman is not subordinate to her male counterparts and as “inequality of the sexes is neither biological phenomenon nor a divine mandate, rather a cultural construct”. She should fight against it.

*Temp. Lecturer, Guru Nanak Khalsa College, Karnal

The novel not only conveys that men are from Mars and women are from Venus as far as their perspective towards life is concerned, it also tries to bring forth the different perspectives through the marital relationship shared by Simrit and Som. Where on one hand Som always believed that he can make his wife happy by providing her all the material pleasures, there on the other hand Simrit found lonely among all such pleasures because in the process she lost the love and affection that is required to sustain a marriage. Som was a sole decision-maker and therefore he never discussed his business with her. 'Either business was something obscene and unmentionable, or women were morons-she wasn't sure which-so most of Som stayed cut from here. Her usefulness to him never extended to areas of the mind.'

Though in the early hours of their marriage Simrit tried to keep pace with Som's life, as despite lack of material pleasures she was happy in her own little world, but in Som's increasing use to earn money in order to own a capacity to buy anything and everything, Simrit found the love and affection slowly losing its value in her life. As he started finding contentment in money, she became a mute spectator of his high aspirations. "They have 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. Not was partnership. Som, the rougher element, had led."⁴ Som's aspirations to become rich brought him many acquaintances and first to lead was Lalli with whom he started a business after leaving his job as a Junior Executive in Lansdowne and Co. Simrit was literally shocked when she came to know that Lalli was a murderer as he killed his wife because she was having an illegitimate relationship with another person. This baffled Simrit as she felt that no reason could be strong enough which can justify a murder, and moreover a murderer cannot roam scot-free like this.

But how can a man go scot-free when he's committed murder?". "Where he comes from, what a man does with his wife is his private affair. Besides, a lot of things happened during the partition. Do you think the law matters at a time like that?" Anyway, it must have been safer to be on Lalli's side than the law's.⁵

But soon Simrit realized that Som shared a common brotherhood with Lalli, in which there was no place for her, "Lalli and he were locked together in a primitive cement much older, more enduring than marriage. Ancestral, tribal, village cement, to which she was a stranger. What she and Som ditched Lalli the upper layer floating free."⁶ Still she managed, but later Som ditched Lalli and started business with Rudy Vetter whom he disliked earlier, as a result Simrit failed to

understand him. “Som’s association with Vetter had begun so suddenly and blossomed overnight into one of those immensely successful business collaborations graduating rapidly to blood brotherhood...?”⁷

Her emotional detachment from Som, also affected the physical aspect of their married life as she thought that more than a physical urges, sex is a spring of emotions, as a meal has to be more than food, after hunger is satisfied. “Once the edge was off hunger a meal had to be more than food. And once past its immediacy, sex had its vision too of tenderness, of humour, of more than a physical act. Sex could be an argument or a problem shared.” But there was no place for such futile emotions in Som’s life, and Simrit realized that in his aspirations to touch the sky, there was no place for her as she can’t cope up with his ever growing financial dreams. ‘As Simrit felt on the verge of a fatal realization. She was no longer able to follow the goals Som had set for himself, and the inability seemed to be spreading through her veins, affecting the very womb of her desires, drying up the fount within her.’ Therefore it was her incapability to be a part of something physically when mentally she was seeking something different that baffled Som, and instead of trying to understand her, he took it is an attack on his honour. “Som was baffled at first and then angered by her behaviour as if she had attacked his honour.”

The novelist conveys that with a little understanding from Som, Simrit might have succeeded in saving her marriage as ‘Talk was the missing link between her and Som, between her and his world. She had a famishing need for talk. She was driven to a quiet desperation for want of it.’ But Som had no time for her, he was too practical in his approach towards life, and though he often used to ask the questions, he never had enough time to wait for their answers and may be inspired from the success of his business he started dealing with his family life as a business deal, which resulted in ruining everything. “He cut short, “Look, I don’t understand that high flown stuff. And God knows you’ve had enough time. I want an answer when I get back. A plain one I can understand.”

The novel brings forth the point that as the basis of a marriage is not merely money, so by merely providing the monetary pleasures it is really difficult to sustain a marriage. The increasing emotional and physical void between them made her realize that they live in two different worlds. Where on the one hand Simrit always longed for permanence and continuity in her life ‘I’ve wanted everything to be the same forever, furniture never moved from its place, a never changing address, children growing old in the same house, a godown where tons of things could

collect and not be in anybody's way, and not else prestige....just because they're a bit battered and old-and where one could find them years later : toys and souvenirs and old report cards and that sort of thing. Life should be continuous." There on the other hand Som was in a habit of changing everything in order to possess the latest and ultra modern things that money can buy. "Som had had no use for old belongings. He had taken a childish pleasure in newness." Though she tried to adjust herself in Som's ever changing new world, but with Som's growing impatience she failed to do so.

I wish. She said passionately, "We could be friends," Som scratched his jaw reflectively. "Aren't you being a bit melodramatic? Anyway, whatever you're trying to get at, it's quite beyond me." Unable to find satisfaction in her life and failing to keep pace with Som's ever hanging life and group of friends she opted for divorce. But even after her divorce Simrit struggles not only against the brutal divorce agreement on her but also against the society where a divorcee is seen with a jaundiced vision. 'He was studying her solicitously, as if divorce were a disease that left pock marks.' And moreover she fails to identify her own value when a group of ladies instead of asking her started enquiring about her husband. "When does your husband do?" One of them wanted to know. Wasn't it odd, when you are standing here yourself, fully a person, not to be asked what you did?"

The businessman like approach of Som and his impassive attitude seem visible in the way he drafted the consent terms of the divorce agreement and got it signed by Simrit in good faith and no sure person could have ever approved of. Raj while explaining the terms to Ram Kishan called it butchery. "There is a fortune in her name is shares, put there to save the husband taxes. And her own small income will be taxed at the highest rate because of these shares. She is not earning much at the moment but if she works from now till doomsday and manages to earn a reasonable living she will hardly see a fraction of it. This settlement cripples any effort she might try to make at supporting herself or saving her future...the obvious thing was to make a trust for the children, but that would attract gifts tax which the husband is not prepared to pay. He's prepared to let her break under the burden, though. It's butchery, the last drop of blood extracted." To which even Ram Kishan agreed that nobody could have ever approved of such thing to take place in any other country except India, where wives are still considered a sacrificial goat and are used or rather misused by their respective husbands to safeguard themselves and their own interests, in which poor wife never had any role to play. And therefore

he became the novelist's spokesman when he conveys that despite their legal rights, Indian women are still considered subordinate to their male counterparts. "the Hindu woman traditionally has no rights apart from what her father or her husband choose to bestow on her. The law has changed some of that, but attitudes haven't changed much, which is clear from the husband's attitude in this case and the court's acceptance of such a document. A woman can apparently still be used as a convenience for tax purposes by her husband even after he has divorced her. In any country it would be indefensible and outrageous."

Latter with the support of people like Raj Edwin Garg, who was a member of parliament and Ram kishan who was his father's friend and as owner of a weekly newspaper, Simrit came in terms to life, as she decided to fight against the injustice and refused to pay the taxes on the shares. She realized that now she was an emancipated woman who could exercise her free will, take her own decision, which filled a sense of loveliness in her. "The days ahead could be entirely hers. They were hers. There they were, like the blank sheet of paper she had looked forward to filling every morning. She could do as she liked with them, and whatever she did from now on would be her own personal achievement-or failure." And therefore at the end of the novel the reader witnesses an emancipated urban Indian woman deciding the course of her life, with no interference from anybody, which gave an excitement to her psyche and a purpose of her life. 'from this high spot an immense valley of choices spread out before her gaze and she felt at last to choose what her life would be. She was filled with sheer rightness of being alive and healthy at this particular time. Part of it was physical well being... The rest was balanced in a deeper calmer rejoicing.' The character of Som and Sumer Singh affirms that modern man is not ready to believe that a woman needs something more than material pleasures to live a healthy life. Simrit's decision to have a divorce and Pixie's refusal to continue her illegitimate affair with Sumer Singh proves that money can never buy love and is also insufficient in providing meaning to the life. As Simrit decided to move away from Som's life without taking any money with her, in the same way despite knowing that Sumer Singh has the power to take away her job as well as her rented house Pixie decided to terminate her illegitimate affair with him. The novel thus brings out the new face of contemporary Indian woman who strives harder to have her own identity without compromising herself at any stage. Her thoughts and emotions are her own, and therefore cannot be exchanged for the material pleasures of life. This instance described in the novel is an eye opener for those people who think that conduct is secondary to material pleasure.

On the whole it has been found that the novelist wants to have assertive women in all walks of life in place of docile and submissive women. She feel that they should have temerity to affirm things as per the innate desire of their conscience. With the help of this novel the novelist images a world turning into a reality where a wife is not being bamboozled into doing things as per the wishes of their husbands. They try to analyze to pros and cons of any innocuous proposal coming from any quarter and suggest modifications and if not modified reject it outright. This shows that they do not have a distinct personality but have the capacity to maintain it. Their modesty should never be construed as an example of their cowardice. Their femininity is not a weakness but a strength to face all pressures, provocations and allurements with equanimity. The message is crystal clear about the woman's role in the changing world order, if they have to live by holding their heads high.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Anita Myles, *Feminism and the Post-Modern Indian Women Novelists in English*, New Delhi: Sarup and Sons, 2006, p. 1.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 2.
3. Nyantara Sahgal, *The Day in Shadow*, New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 1991, p.77.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 4.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 28.
6. *Ibid.*, pp. 79-80.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 90
8. *Ibid.*, p. 90.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 90.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 90.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 93
12. *Ibid.*, p. 97
13. *Ibid.*, p. 37.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 37.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 97.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 4.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 6.

18. Ibid., pp. 167-68.
19. Ibid., p. 168.
20. Ibid., p. 181.
21. Ibid., p. 236.