

Simrit's emergence from the shattering experience of divorce in Nayantara Sahgal's *The Day in Shadow*

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Abstract

Life after divorce for women in India is not easy. In India, divorce is shameful, especially for women. During nineteenth century, women came out of their cells and shells to seek education. The last quarter of the 19th century and the start of the 20th century witnessed the emergence of Indian English Women novelists. Nayantara Sahgal is one of the prominent contemporary Indian Women writers writing in English. Her concept of free women transcends the limits of economic or social freedom and becomes a mental or emotional attitude. The need for freedom for women, according to Sahgal, must make her aware of herself as an individual and refuse to tolerate injustice. Sahgal's *The Day in Shadow* centers on the theme of the protagonist Simrit's quest for freedom and self-realization. Simrit's marriage with Som, an industrialist, turns out to be a failure. In spite of matrimonial comforts, she is compelled by an inner urge to seek divorce. But after her divorce she still faces problems not only of financial tensions but also of her identity crisis. Simrit's emergence from the trauma of her unsuccessful marriage, with the determination to live as a free individual is an assertion of her personal freedom, ruthlessly snatched away by Som and the Consent Terms. Simrit represents those women of the Indian Hindu society who are inspired by a sense of good and ideal values of life and who yearn for understanding sympathy and friendship to blossom between herself and Som, but the cruel, materialistic and selfish husband finds it melodramatic.

Key words: Indian women, divorce, freedom, individuality, emergence.

Life after divorce for women in India is not easy. In India, divorce is shameful, especially for women. During nineteenth century, women came out of their cells and shells to seek education. With the rise of Capitalism, the two World Wars and Civil War, women started identifying patriarchal society as the source of their oppression. The patriarchal joint family system consolidated the position of the man by forever damning that of the women. The man, all powerful, wants to demonstrate his superiority over the woman. He controls her life, her actions and her behavior. So the Indian woman accepting her inferiority never exercised her free will.

The emancipation of women begins after the coming of Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Jotiba Phule and Pandit Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, who made efforts to improve the miserable status of women. It includes abolishing sati and child marriage, promoting women's education, obtaining legal rights for women to own property and requiring the law to acknowledge women's status by granting them basic rights in matters such as adoption etc.

The last quarter of the 19th century and the start of the 20th century witnessed the emergence of Indian English Women novelists. These women novelists began to portray women as facing the conflicts and problems of fusing tradition and modernity. It is a conflict between a personal fulfillment of desires and their duty towards family and children. Thus most of the women novelists took up the theme of the problem of adjustment and they are shown adjusting themselves to the ground reality.

Nayantara Sahgal is one of the prominent contemporary Indian Women writers writing in English. Her novels deal with the protest of women against the denial of freedom and against the out-dated social opinions and orthodox treatment of them. Her concept of free women transcends the limits of economic or social freedom and becomes a mental or

emotional attitude. The need for freedom for women, according to Sahgal, does not merely mean the defiance of old, established conventions but it must also make her aware of herself as an individual and refuse to tolerate injustice.

Sahgal's *The Day in Shadow* centers on the theme of the protagonist Simrit's quest for freedom and self-realization. Simrit's marriage with Som, an industrialist, turns out to be a failure. In spite of matrimonial comforts, she is compelled by an inner urge to seek divorce. But after her divorce she still faces problems not only of financial tensions but also of her identity crisis. She, at last, marries Raj who is her friend, her well-wisher and the rescuer from her divorce settlement tax problems. In his article 'Self-Delineation in Fiction: A Comparative Study of Select Works of Nayantara Sahgal and Akilon' Ranjit Singh quotes Sahgal's comments about *The Day in Shadow*:

In this book I tried to figure out something that has happened to me— the shattering experience of divorce. I wanted to show how even in a free country like ours, where women are equal citizens; a woman can be criminally exploited without creating a ripple (Singh 96).

Sahgal's *The Day in Shadow* opens with crisis which is quietly diffused and resolved. Simrit who is unable to put up with the patriarchal world of her husband, chooses to divorce him and the divorce is already over when the novel begins. The tensions and conflicts which is expected a stop after divorce, ironically continues in Simrit's life like a shadow in the form of divorce settlement mockingly called as 'Consent Terms'.

Simrit's emergence from the trauma of her unsuccessful marriage, with the determination to live as a free individual is an assertion of her personal freedom, ruthlessly snatched away by Som and the Consent Terms. Simrit represents those women of the Indian Hindu society who are inspired by a sense of good and ideal values of life and who yearn for

understanding sympathy and friendship to blossom between herself and Som, but the cruel, materialistic and selfish husband finds it melodramatic. Som was interested in accumulating wealth, in making money, in his male heir and in his ammunitions deals. In his world Simrit could not find concern and understanding. He considers that the inequality between them is the right order of things. He wants her to be a subdued wife. But Simrit cannot find this surrounding worth living. Simrit wants to nurture, to build, to cherish, but Som represents only materialism. Som turns out to be a ruthless entrepreneur who is caught in the whirl pool of business deals and profits. The process of rift between them was unremarkable in the beginning but grows wider with Som's success in business.

Som's insensitivity and differences of opinion fill Simrit's life with distress. He starts treating her like one would treat a thing, but Simrit who is innocent, docile and meek being, keeps yearning for a

weekend with Som, somewhere remote, where she would methodically break down his dividing lines, melt one gesture into another, make them soft, searching children with each other. But Som didn't feel the need (DIS 27) .

He even kept her like a possession, an object and like all other belongings to him, he had given his friends all rights to analyse, even dissect her merits and demerits. He turns her into "an object of pity and tenderness, a poor little thing" (DS 78). Som begins to show his true colour in the form of patriarchal attitude towards Simrit who denies her individuality and refuses to provide her freedom. He totally forgets to show her love and he not even considers her as a woman with flesh and blood and with all feelings. She resents having no participation in the ordinary decisions of everyday life not even in the choice of curtains or chair covers. Sahgal voices Simrit's distress as

Som had had a veto. Not even about the servants. She had dismissed the cook

twice for drunkenness and bad behavior and Som had kept him on. Little things, she had thought at the time, nothing important, nothing to quarrel about, but building up into a frightening situation— herself a cog in a machine—with which it had become impossible to live (DIS 38).

Som's chief occupation is how to reach the top and to serve his selfish interests. He does not hesitate at changing jobs and discarding friendship. Simrit loses her patience when Som finalizes a new deal to make armaments with Vettar. This becomes the breaking point of her relationship with Som because to her it is indicative of the final erosion of Som's humanity. He on the other hand feels that he is performing the husband's role very well since he can take her abroad and buy anything she wants and air condition the whole place. But Simrit needs something more than mere material property. She needs continuity and warmth in life with Som.

Simrit is pushed to live a life of recluse because of the lack of communication between her and Som. To Sahgal, failure to communicate and understand is the main cause of marital discord. Som always speaks Punjabi to his friend Lalli although Simrit is in the room and cannot understand that language. Simrit recognizes that although at Som's business dinners she must not make trivial conversation, talk is "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" (DIS 93). Driven by these circumstances, Simrit wishes to leave this miserable matrimonial connection which has become an emotional wasteland and is compelled by an inner urge to seek divorce. But the irony is that even divorce does not help her. Miti Pandey in his book *Feminism in Contemporary British and Indian English Fictions* says that it is

easier to get a car or a telephone or a license for an industry but it is quite painful and dislocating in its effect on Simrit. Legally, the woman

today can go to the law court, seek divorce but the general attitude of people is still the same (155-56).

The divorce in which Simrit seeks shelter, peace, freedom and independence precisely turns out to be a potential source of further trouble. The huge tax which is imposed on Simrit by Som, which she has to pay from her insufficient income, makes her feel utterly devastated and overwhelmed. Miti Pandey's views about the divorce is that

the separations are irrevocable. Through divorce the woman does succeed in preserving her dignity but the cost in terms of emotional upheavals and social stigma is enormous.... The woman is always the victim and at the receiving end (94).

Simrit feels that she is reduced almost to the level of a beast of burden with this tax case. She pours out her agony saying

This is what an overloaded donkey feels like standing there as large as life with its back breaking, and no one doing anything about it, not because they can't see it, but because it's a donkey and loads are for donkeys. (DIS 56)

Divorce becomes an important device on Som's part to enslave and revenge Simrit. It does not stand as a symbol of a new beginning. It is rather an age of old confrontation with the orthodox views, regarding the position and status of women. Even the society does not view Simrit as a person striving for self-fulfillment and independence; rather she is curiously watched by others as if divorce were "a disease that left pock marks" (DIS 4). Emotionally she suffers from the shadow of divorce which never left her even for a moment. She feels that she was

clinging to a Balustrade at the very top of the building, within reach of the sky, when her fingers were wrenched loose, one by one, and she was hurled to the pavement below. The queer thing was that no one took any notice of her fall.

Cars and people kept going by. A deafening scream, her own, went on and on... she picked herself up in panic and was relieved to find she did not fall apart. She held. She took a deep breath... My skin is whole, not even a break or a split in it anywhere. It's the inside that has gone to pieces, and I'll just have to go along very carefully from now on... The pain, a leper-like thing, detached itself from her and walked beside her to the end of the pavement, the end of the road and beyond (DIS 50-51).

It is at this critical time that Simrit finds the helping hand of Raj Edwin Garg, a converted Christian. It is Raj who shows her how to live and tackle things in her life; otherwise her existence had been like that of an autumn leaf. He motivates her on many occasions. Raj is the one who fills Simrit's spirit with optimism and courage to fight her divorce settlements. Raj injects in Simrit the elixir for life which her culture and religion failed to provide her so far. He says, "What is absent from this Hindu civilization of yours is avidity, the positive desire for something positive. You have to unearth that, and if your principles don't help you to, find some that do" (DIS 102). Simrit gradually finds in Raj everything which she had been searching for in her ex-husband Som. Raj helps her to regain her awareness of herself as individual, a human being with her own identity. It is only with Raj's constant support that she emerges out of the shadows as a more mature and stronger personality. He helps her regain her self-confidence by making her exercise her mind and do things for her own satisfaction rather than for others. Raj also at his best shows love combined with pity for Simrit. While doing so, Raj does not only rebuke her for her inertia but also mocks the race which she belongs to. The Hindu race is the butt of Raj's mockery.

Sahgal has made use of Raj to hit hard at the conventional Hinduism and its hollow ideas. In an interview about her novel *The Day in Shadow*, Sahgal has said that

the problem of passivity becomes intensely concentrated in the person of one woman. Simrit becomes almost paralyzed with her passivity. She is reduced to sitting and suffering instead of fighting the wrong in the shape of the unfair legal settlement that her husband has inflicted on her at the time of their divorce (Sinha 160-61).

It is Simrit's innocent acceptance of Hindu traditional code that made her accept even the tax burden as her 'karma'. Simrit's passivity is rightly criticized by Sahgal in her article, "Of Divorce and Hindu Women". She writes "Divorce for women nature is a sin, and in expiation of her share of guilt she stays mute and acquiescent over the settlement, willing to accept it as part of her karma" (Choubey 83).

Raj is the person with whom communication is possible for Simrit. Sahgal points out that it was Raj's ability to talk, which first attracted Simrit towards him. With Som she had felt famished for conversation, not so with Raj. Simrit's first reaction to Raj is described by Sahgal as

Before she noticed the way he stood or smiled or his typical gesturing, she was attracted by his talk. There was such a wealth of it, of ideas she could see taking shape before her eyes. Not a re-hash of other people's views but rough-hewn stars of his own invention, carelessly offered to the company around him to polish if they cared to. He wore his ideas with the same slight arrogance that other men wore perfect clothes (DIS 100).

Simrit finds gradual fulfillment in Raj who re-instills her lost self-confidence which she has kept buried within her all these days. He provides Simrit with the strength to bear this injustice and emerge again as an individual, free woman to live life according to her own desires. Raj becomes for her a pillar of strength – a friend and companion on whom she can depend. So Simrit had to

“rely on him more and more since she had set up on her own in Defence Colony.

He always did what he said he would do, the only stable element in the emotional debris of her new world. He was solidly there” (DIS 16).

Simrit had acted out of conviction in at least one crisis of her life and Raj admired her for her courage. She had broken all traditions by walking out with the children from Som’s house to face a new and uncertain future. It is this inner fighting strength of Simrit that almost compels Raj to help her. She is a broken person, having understood very late the full impact of the divorce settlement. It is after Raj had explained her how the deed had trapped and maimed her that she realized the slow butchery and revenge it codified. Raj, too, is equally shocked at the brutality of Som. Angrily he points out,

“Even a life sentence ends after fourteen years. Yours is till you die” (DIS 40).

Simrit fortunately finds fulfillment in Raj and is able to look ahead to a brighter future, unmindful of the shadows being cast by the Consent Terms.

Simrit is the prototype of the author herself. Sahgal who divorces her husband Gautham, in 1967 after 3 children and 18 years of married life has experienced the same divorce settlement’s tax burden. Sahgal felt so overwhelmed with the enormity of her tax burden that she eventually overcame her problem of tax only through her own independent efforts.

Divorce, no doubt, has become a social reality today, but still marriage has not lost its permanence and stability. Sahgal believes in the New Woman’s nurturance of marriage with love, care and candors so that the society may become stable. It is communication and not perfection to be attained through marriage. Men too have many causes to be unhappy but it is the women who suffer more. So, in India, the New Woman’s march is to seek self-expression within the social institution. In this way Simrit is emerging from the shadow of her unhappy

marriage and a dreadful divorce settlement problem as an independent individual to give a fresh start to her life with Raj Garg. Although she was very traditional in the beginning accepting its false conditioning into a subdued womanhood, finally with her more mature decision to marry for second time instead of staying as a divorcee for her whole time, Simrit attains her transformation and like a true feminist she becomes aware of her own identity, existence and rights.

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