

## Feminism and Its Influence on Women's Emancipation in Nayantara Sahgal's *The Day in Shadow*

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Nayantara Sahgal

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### Abstract

Feminism is an expression which connotes a movement for securing equality between the sexes in all walks of life, social, economic and political. It aims at ensuring for womanhood freedom in all respects. Nayantara Sahgal primarily deals with feminism in most of her novels. She is a writer of feminist perspective. She projects her heroines struggle for freedom and self-realization in her fiction. She infuses into her heroines the spirit of self-respect and individualism. Her heroines always try to realize their self-hood either unconsciously or consciously and deliberately. In *The Day in Shadow*, she shows how a woman can be criminally exploited 'without creating a ripple.'

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The novel delineates the emotional and economic strains of divorce on the female protagonist, Simrit. Simrit is an independent woman who can make choices. She marries Som, solely attracted by his colour, life and action disregarding opposition from her parents and the dislike of her friends. Very soon, she realizes her folly when she is forbidden in his house to have a say even in routine matters like choosing servants or a cook, selecting curtains or sofa covers. Disappointed at Som's attempts to restrict her individuality and the humiliating treatment meted out to her, Simrit resolves to dissolve her seventeen-year-old marriage. Even as a divorcee, she asserts her individuality. In the sight against the outworn traditions, she chooses to start a new life with Raj, a liberal thinker.

This paper presents in detail the problems faced by woman and their struggle for self-identity and their emancipation from the traditional bondage of the patriarchal society.

### **Key Words**

Feminism- marital discord - quest for identity-identity crisis – self realization – emancipation

### **On Defining Feminism**

Feminism is a search for identity and a quest for the definition of the self. It is an expression which means a movement for securing equality between sexes in all walks of life, social, economic and political. It aims at ensuring for womanhood freedom in all respects. Feminism plays a prominent role in the novels of Nayantara Sahgal. Sahgal's novels bring out her as a writer with feminist concerns seeking independent existence of women. She sees women as victims of conventional Indian society engaged in their quest for identity. Sahgal has tried to portray the sensibility of woman: how a woman looks out at herself and her problems. She feels that woman should try to understand and realize herself as human being and not just as an appendage to male life.

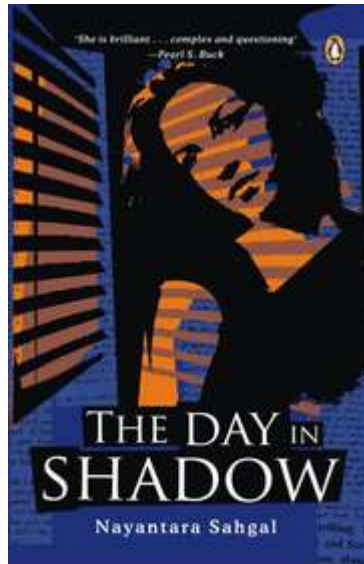
### **Main Theme of *The Day in Shadow***

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The main theme of *The Day in Shadow* is the continued exploitation of the woman by her husband. The continued tendency towards exploitation of woman by man provokes her to revolt against the social system and reconstitute it on her terms. Thus, *The Day in Shadow* marks the emergence of the new type of woman who can present her own terms on which compatible and dignified family life will be possible.

The novelist narrates the story of Som and Simrit who seem to get on well during the first few years of their marriage. But Som's inability to understand her, except as an object of physical attraction, fit only for physical pleasure and enjoyment, compels her to seek human communication outside the marital bonds. Som treats her not as a person but as a possession. Som is a business magnate, aspiring for greater comforts and riches, but he is unmindful of his wife, Simrit as a person who has individuality and who aspires for her own identity. Unable to get recognition of her identity from Som, Simrit carves a new path for herself and for the women of her kind who might despair of her husband domination.

### **Simrit and Som**

Simrit is an independent woman who can make choices. She marries Som, solely attracted by his colour, life and action disregarding opposition from her parents and the dislike of her friends. Very soon, she realizes her folly when she is forbidden in his house to have a say even in routine matters like choosing servants or a cook, selecting curtains or sofa

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covers. Disappointed at Som's attempts to restrict her individuality and the humiliating treatment meted out to her, Simrit resolves to dissolve her seventeen-year-old marriage. Even as a divorcee, she asserts her individuality. In the sight against the outworn traditions, she chooses to start a new life with Raj, a liberal thinker.

Simrit finds herself shut out of Som's world. He never consults her in any matter. Unable to withstand his ambitious nature, she longs to isolate herself from his world of commerce. All her attempts to change him go awry. Som becomes furious at her protest and asks her either to be a docile wife or to break off their marital relationship. Simrit plumps, though reluctantly, for the second alternative.

### **Ready to Leave**

She is prepared to forsake him and all the riches and comforts rather than lead the abject life of a sex-satisfying companion. To live with self-respect is her primary right and for that, she risks the unknown future with courage and confidence. She demonstrates that individual freedom is so precious that it should not be compromised or allowed to be suppressed. For her, emotional involvement is far more important than the sexual relationship and it is an individual that she seeks fulfillment and expression, not as possession.

Simrit, a sensitive being in her own right, longs for communication and understanding which she is unable to find in Som's world of ambition and money. Som expects her to conform to his ideal of subdued womanhood and considers the inequality of their relations to be the right order of things. Simrit finds this denial of freedom a suffocating experience. Her life with Som lacks continuity and warmth. She feels isolated within her skin and even the physical relationship is not involving or kind enough. It is an act with beginning and an end with nothing in-between or even afterwards. Simrit feels completely alienated from Som that the physical act can no longer transport her unresisting to a comfortable place.

### **Women as Servile Creatures**

Women are still regarded as servile creatures by people like Som. They are regarded as belonging to the sphere of sex and procreation. Men like Som expect them to live under

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their control. Simrit is an educated woman who yearns for a free communication of ideas with her husband but feels detached and ignored like a piece of furniture used only for physical comfort whenever needed by Som. She wants freedom, love, warmth, affection and understanding but Som never bothers about her feelings. Som never understands that money can't give her what she wants. Simrit is fed up with this life and takes divorce from her husband.

It is a very common factor that an Indian woman has to struggle a lot to walk out of her husband's life because they are bonded to the traditional social set-up. So they need extra courage to break the traditional bondage i.e. marriage. It is with such indomitable courage and strength of conviction Simrit comes out of Som's life.

### **Role as a Divorcee**

After discarding her former role as an intellectual and a prolific writer, Simrit thinks she has a different and responsible role to play as a divorcee; feeling uprooted and abandoned in the society. Her problems encompassing physical, emotional and economic spheres are many and varied. A woman used to the luxuries of life, suddenly find herself to have to go without telephone, even milk or ration card. She has taken "all the living wealth [children] --- and had left behind the crockery and furniture and linen and jewels and silver --- Som got all the things, the cars, the bank accounts."(Sahgal, *The Day in Shadow*: 58) While Som live in luxury, Simrit lives in penury. She is not even sure how long her flat would be affordable, its rent being too expensive for her. In spite of all these problems, the courage with which she tires to adjust herself to the aftermath of the divorce is admirable.

Simrit possess extraordinary will-power. As a single parent of her children, even in the most trying situations, she does not lose courage. She continues to be assertive and if the situation demands, even becomes aggressive. Her husband, too, is aware of her strength: "Som could have forgiven her if she had been a weaker being, unsure, dependent, and even deceiving. But beneath her docility she was none of these things unpardonable."(Sahgal, *The Day in Shadow*: 53)

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## **Consent Terms**

Moolchand, Som's company lawyer, at a meeting to clarify the Consent Terms to Simrit, finds it rather unbelievable for a woman to have absolute control over herself. The novelist writes: "Moolchand might have reacted better if she had broken down and wept, pleaded her plight, not displayed this control and competence. She was something outside his experience, a woman who exercised her mind." (Sahgal, *The Day in Shadow*: 59) The most glorious instance of her self-confidence and crisis management is seen when she rejects to with contempt Som's offer to receive the income that accrues of the shares on the condition of remaining unmarried.

## **No Freedom, But Confrontation**

For Simrit, divorce does not bring freedom but confrontation with all that is orthodox in this male-centered society. It is easy to get, easier than a car or a telephone or a license for an industry but it is painful and dislocating in its effect on Simrit. Though the law had changed, attitudes hadn't and Simrit feels uprooted and abandoned in a husband-centered world. It is difficult to begin anew for the past lives on in the present, in the memories of the shared years and the lives of the children. Simrit feels that "a part of her would always be married to Som" (Sahgal, *The Day in Shadow*: 220)

Simrit finds her life disrupted and herself in the midst of a peculiar financial problem. The heavy tax payments are an attempt to enslave her in every way, and divorce instead of being a new beginning is a confrontation with the age old orthodox views regarding the status of women. All her attempts to make others see the divorce settlement from her point of view fail because people do not see her as a person seeking freedom and fulfillment. As long as it provides for the future of their son, it seems to others to be a fair settlement. Simrit likens her position to that of a donkey whose burden attracts no notice and draws forth no pity for 'loads for donkeys' (Sahgal, *The Day in Shadow*: 56). The divorce settlement is a continuation of their marriage, it pins her down to the role of a victim and attempts to crush her desire to be free in a positive way. The first step she has to take is to face the situation squarely and it is the courage of this stand which frees her from the bonds of the marriage as well as the divorce settlement. Out of this struggle to be free is born a new Simrit-a person who makes

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choices, takes decisions and becomes aware of herself as a person. First the mind, then the body open up to new responses and life affirms itself in a new sense of fulfillment in her relationship with Raj which is an involving and an equal one.

### **Divorce and Marriage as Social Institutions**

Simrit's divorce does not imply that marriage has failed as a social institution or that it has outlived its utility. On the other hand it clearly demonstrates the need for reciprocal relationships in marriage. Man-woman relationship whether within or outside marriage, needs to be liberated from conventional approaches to it in order to become a satisfying and fulfilling one. Marriage is neither a system of slavery nor an escape route. It is not even a contract-for it is wrong to approach it in that spirit. It is partnership based on respect and consideration and requiring involvement from both. This relationship has been subjected to an unusual strain in a number of ways. Partly the break-up of the joint family system itself is responsible for the increase in friction between husband and wife.

### **A New Life**

Raj and Simrit plan to get married, they have enough confidence in their own selves and the future to want to take that step. Marriage has a permanence and stability about it and does not become a superfluity even when divorce has become a social reality. What concerns the novelist most is the need for a mature approach to marriage, the need to nurture it with love and care and candor. She wants communication not perfection, for men and women have their own limitations. Though she is fully aware that men can be as unhappy as women when the relationship is not satisfactory one, she stresses the point that ordinarily it is women who suffer more and are denied right to self-expression.

After a long struggle Simrit also turns out to be a woman who can make choices, take decisions and makes up her mind to start life anew with Raj from whom she can get what she longs for and expects from her husband-love, warmth, affection and understanding. Her acceptance of Raj is based on his endearing qualities of tenderness, honesty and equality which she has vainly searched for in Som. Raj's 'rich warm concern' appeals to her. He helps her regain her emotional and intellectual equilibrium.

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Raj is a mature person, takes personal interests in her and loves her. The fact that she is a middle-aged woman with several children does not deter him. He has great respect for her and intends foolery, “No handholding games with her. No games of any sort. With her it had to be on a long, strong basis.”(Sahgal, *The Day in Shadow*: 157) His interest mainly springs from his passion for crusading against oppressions of any kind.

### **Mind Over Body**

Raj-Simrit relationship begins with the mind and not the body. They seek fulfillment not as possessions but as individuals. Listening to Raj, Simrit feels that she is lifted out and soothed. She thinks: “After all attraction had to start somewhere and what better starting point than the mind?”(Sahgal, *The Day in Shadow*: 160) Simrit is aware that in marrying Raj, there is every possibility that her physical as well as psychological needs are met without losing her dignity and sense of equality and that she can live a truer life without any pretence. Simrit’s futile cry for equality in her relationship with Som materializes now in the relationship with Raj. Not legislation but understanding, love and respect can bring equality in a relationship and both of them have these qualities in abundance. Along with Raj, she builds up a world on the foundations of justice, equality and humanity. Thus Simrit emerge out as a new woman who can present her own terms on which harmonious and dignified family life is possible now and in future.

### **Forces That Made Simrit to Rebel**

What forces Simrit to rebel against the conventional security of marriage is her yearning for a free communication of ideas with her husband beyond the glandular sensations of sex. Simrit realizes that talk is the missing link in her relationship with Som and tries in vain to engage him in any meaningful dialogue. She suffers marriage with Som as a solitary confinement of the human spirit instead of enjoying it as a communication and a union of two human mind and spirits. Having chosen her husband, Simrit finds she does not have the freedom to choose anything else, not even such trifling domestic matter as chair covers and curtains. Her tastes, her ideas, her values are quite different from her husband’s but it is



Som's wishes and his desires which prevail smothering her initiative and her interest in living, till in the end she feels she is just a log in the machine.

Simrit and Som's relationship is marked by lack of tenderness and warmth, communication and compatibility. Hurt and humiliated at his condescending attitude, she suffers in silence for seventeen long years mainly because of her upbringing in a patriarchal society where male superiority is taken for granted. Her anxiety and restlessness are evident right from the beginning. Her seeking divorce from Som is an indication of her protest against being victimized by him. It is Simrit's longing for freedom and individuality that urges her to take divorce from her husband. Simrit does not want to be known as her husband's wife but as her own self. When someone asked her about the profession of her husband, she thinks:

“Wasn't it odd, when you were standing yourself, fully a person, not to be asked what you did? There was such an enormous separating gulf between herself and these women, most women-most people. May be the question would be different in the twenty-first century. Simrit herself had never accepted a world where men did things and women waited for them.  
(Sahgal, *The Day in Shadow*: 6)

### **The Process of Emancipation**

In the process of emancipation, it has become necessary for Simrit to get rid of her fears and inhibitions. She has to overcome social opinion and orthodoxy on one hand and personal hesitation and reluctance on the other. She continues to think, despite divorce, that her connection with Som is continued through her children and hence is besieged by feelings of guilt at her association with Raj. When Simrit meets Som to discuss the Consent Terms, Som's meanness comes before her in full proportions and perhaps this is the reason of her sudden feeling of being liberated from guilty feeling. She announces to Raj: "I'd got rid of my guilt. It was gone without a trace and in its place there was a strong, positive feeling." (Sahgal, *The Day in Shadow*: 208) Simrit considers the new possibility that life has held before her:

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... she felt free at last to choose what her life would be. She was filled with the 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 rejoining.

(Sahgal, *The Day in Shadow*: 236)

Raj and Simrit bask in the sunshine of freedom in the day-break and exchange with each other “the good tidings of great joy” of life, rooted in faith.

### **Still a Victim in Male-Dominated Society?**

By accepting Raj, it should not be considered that Simrit continues to be a victim in the male-dominated society. Raj is total contrast to Som-sensitive, warm and tender. He treats her as an equal and she is perfectly at ease in Raj’s company. Their relationship is not one where Raj is domineering and dictating. There are several instances to show that there is perfect equality and, as a matter of fact, very often it is Simrit who takes decisions and imposes them on him. Though Simrit love Raj, she is not prepared to marry him, at least her problems are solved. But Raj is particular that they should marry immediately so that he can share her problems and make her happy. Simrit is a middle-aged divorcee without money but several children and a tax problem, the size of a python. Hence no motive can be attributed to Raj’s eagerness other than love for her and when she too loves him, he doesn’t find any reason to prolong the relationship without the sacredness of marriage.

### **Feminism Well Illustrated**

Feminism is no doubt pro-woman but it need not be anti-man. The novelist does not advocate ‘female enclaves’ and is not anti-male. She believes that a woman can fulfill herself wholly in the loving and harmonious relationship with a man. With no doubt, her heroine, Simrit, the female protagonist of *The Day in Shadow* is an embodiment of womanhood freedom in all respects.

If the ultimate goal of feminism is to make woman have freedom of choice and to live a life of her own, Simrit precisely exercises this freedom of choice in choosing Som earlier

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and Raj later. Raj appears to be superior to Simrit in intellect and therefore domineering in nature. But Simrit with independent spirit will never bow down before male authority. Perhaps, Nayantara Sahgal wants to bring home the essential truth that no man-woman relationship can exist on the principle of perfect equality. It is for a woman to have freedom and independence to lead an honourable and dignified life. There cannot be any doubt of Simrit possessing this in abundance. Nayantara Sahgal proves her credentials as an impressive feminist writer by portraying Simrit as one who gives up her intolerably compliant role to defend her independence and self-respect and readjusts herself in her new role with dignity and responsibility.

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