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A SENSE OF WOMAN'S SELF-ASSERTION IN NAYANTARA SAHGAL'S *THE DAY IN SHADOW*

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Abstract

Feminism is an expression which means a movement for securing equality between sexes in all walks of life like social, economic and political. It is a search for identity and a quest for the definition of the self. It aims at ensuring for womanhood freedom in all respects. Nayantara Sahgal, the most significant voice among Indian women writers, primarily deals with feminism in most of her novels. She is a writer of feminist perspective. She projects her heroine's struggle for freedom and self-realization in her fiction. She infuses into her heroines the spirit of self-respect and individualism. Her novel *The Day in Shadow* depicts the emotional and economic strains of divorce through the character of Simrit. Simrit is an independent woman. She marries Som, solely attracted by his wealth and colour disregarding the dislike of her parents and her friends. She realizes her folly when she is forbidden in his house. Disappointed by Som's attempts to restrict her individuality and the humiliating treatment meted out to her, Simrit decides to dissolve her seventeen-years-old marriage. Even as a divorcee, she asserts her individuality. She chooses to start a new life with Raj, a liberal thinker. This paper presents the problems faced by women and their struggle for self-identity.

Keywords: Feminism, marital dissention, exploitation, search for identity, self assertion.

INTRODUCTION

In *The Day in Shadow* 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 compels her to seek human communication outside the marital bonds. Som treats her not as a person but as an object. Som is a business magnate who is aspiring for comforts and riches. But he is unmindful of his wife. Unable to get recognition of her own identity from Som, Simrit carves a new path for herself.

Simrit finds herself shut out of Som's world. He never consults her in any matter. Unable to withstand his ambitious nature, she wants to isolate herself from his world of commerce. All her attempts to change him end in vain. Som becomes furious at her protest and asks her either to be a docile wife or to break off their marital relationship. 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. Simrit, a sensitive being in her

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own right, longs for communication and understanding which she is unable to find in Som's world of ambition and money.

Simrit is an educated woman who yearns for 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 gets divorced 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 bound to the traditional social set-up. So they need extra courage to break the traditional bondage. 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 a meaningful dialogue. She feels that she is just a log in the machine.

The relationship between Simrit and Som 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.

After discarding her former role, Simrit thinks that 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. While Som lives in luxury, Simrit lives in penury. She is not even sure that how long her flat would be affordable as its rent being too expensive for her. But she possesses 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.

For Simrit, divorce does not bring freedom but confrontation with all that is orthodox in this male-centered society. It is difficult to begin a new life as she is still in the memories of the past. Simrit finds her life disrupted and she is 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. Out of this struggle a new Simrit is born- a person who makes choices and takes decisions. 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.

Raj and Simrit plan to get married. They have enough confidence in their own selves. 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, 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 a 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 is a mature person, takes personal interest in her and loves her. He has great respect for her. His interest mainly springs from his passion for crusading against oppressions of any kind.

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. 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 emerges out as a new woman who can present her own terms on which harmonious and dignified family life is possible at present and in future.

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 that she gets rid of her guilt. Simrit considers the new possibility that life holds before her. 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.

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 loves Raj, she is not prepared to marry him, at least till her problems are solved. But Raj is particular that they should marry immediately so that he can share her problems and make her happy.

CONCLUSION

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. 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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