

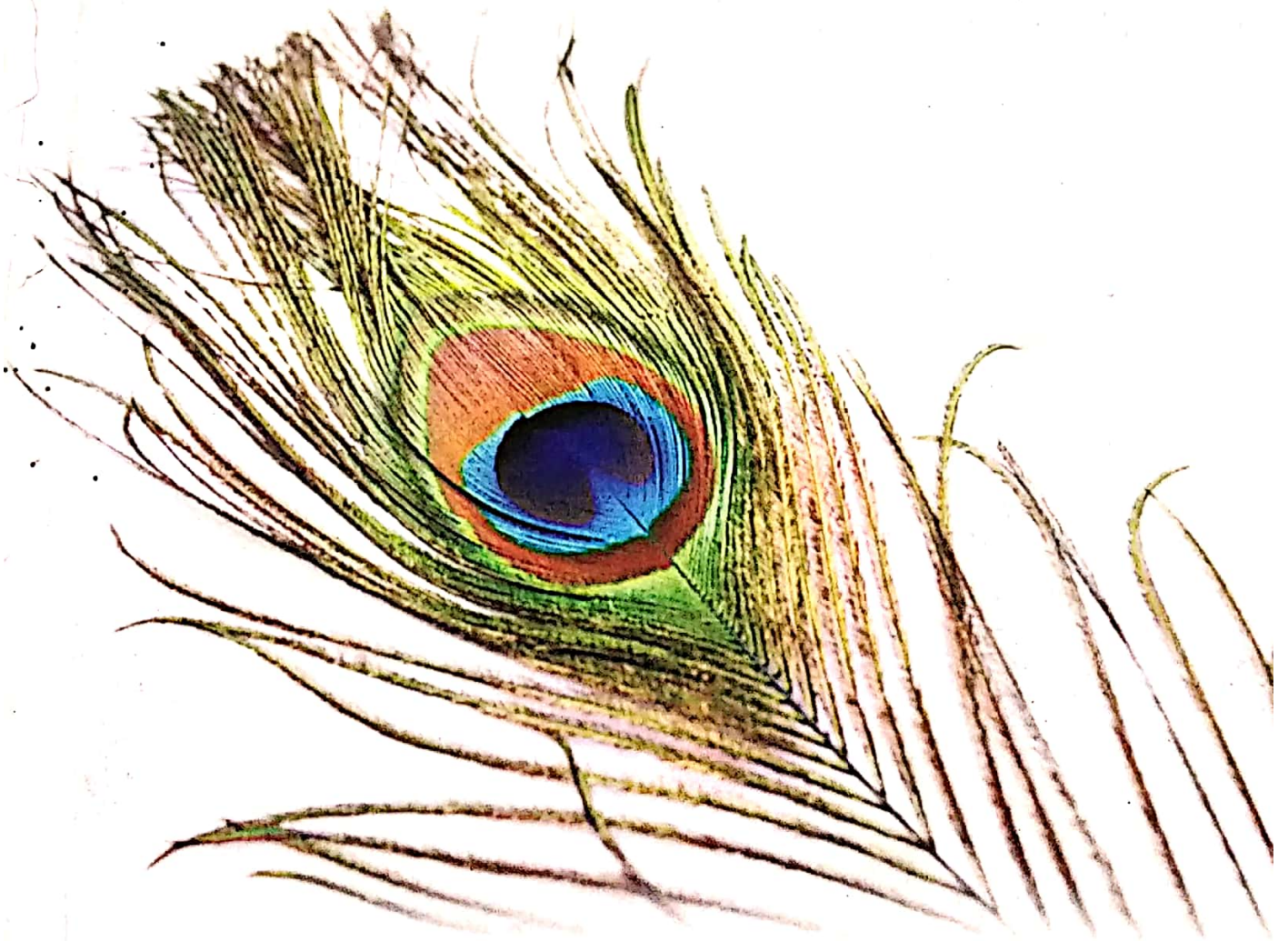
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## **PATHETIC STATUS OF WOMAN IN NAYANTARA SAHGAL'S *THE DAY IN SHADOW***

**Abdul Anees Abdul Rasheed**

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**Abstract:**

This paper deals with a critical study of Nayantara Sahgal's *The Day in Shadow*. The main focus of this paper is to find out how the novelist has dealt with predicament of woman and particularly the Indian Hindu divorced woman; her struggle for survival, her struggle for identity; her imposed responsibilities. It also focuses on the falsely generated norms and conditions of the Indian male dominated society within which how a divorced woman is socially, mentally and psychologically tortured. This novel also deals with the gender discrimination, humiliation of the motherhood. It also highlights the world created by the novelist within which we witness the world of gender equality, mutual love between husbands and wives, the women having their own identities and exhibiting their potentials.

The incredibility of India lies in its multiculturalism, customs and traditions. Majority of the Indian people still have carried rigid

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and conservative attitudes that have always influenced the social, cultural, economical, political and domestic status of men and women and particularly the matrimonial ties. Apart from these, the male dominance is the key factor. For many centuries we have been the witness of the apathy of the Indian woman. She seems as if she has been doing the penance of her being a woman. Many times, her flaw is that she is flawless; her crime is that she is innocent. Ironically the woman seems to be the mute witness of her own emotional and psychological apathy. Parveen Shakir, a Pakistani Urdu poet has appropriately reflected:

*Main such kahoongi, magar phir bhi haar jaoongi  
Wo Jhoot bolega, aur la-jawab kar dega*

(Shakir Parveen, 1976: 208)

*Though I will tell the truth, I will lose,  
He will tell the absolute lie, yet will leave the listener unanswerable.*

This couplet reflects how the innocence of the woman is tortured in the male dominant society: she is emotionally marginalized; her inner voice is not listened; she is psychologically segregated, and how man enjoys the privileges gifted by the patriarchal society. It is man's privilege that even if he is guilty, he is set free; he, though faulty, hardly admits his fault. Ironically, the woman has to surrender; she has to undergo the sufferings for doing nothing; and it is confirmed that many times, innocent souls are agonized without any concrete reasons.

Sahgal's *The Day in Shadow* (1971) is intimately an autobiographical novel. It deals with the psychological, financial and other problems of the protagonist, Simrit Raman and how she struggles to come out of these problems. Simrit Raman has been presented to be suffering the psychological torments in the male dominated society. She seems to be paying the price of her own being in the society. This novel also deals with the apathy of Indian woman deserted due to divorce. This is one of the socially agonizing aspects of the Indian society in which only the divorced woman has to suffer the punishment for being separated from her husband. In case of divorce, whoever may be at fault woman or her husband, it is the divorced woman who has to bear the



subsequent consequences. And it is the man who can easily find another wife. Matrimonial ties are said to be sacred and absolute in Indian society. Religions as well as the social norms laid by the male dominated society expect only woman to be obedient and submissive, while husbands are considered oriented even if they are wrong. Woman's existence is strictly confined by the social norms and conditions; she is expected to strictly follow the ideals of *pativrata*. Ironically the woman has no her own identity. It is the Indian society in which the woman is recognized by her husband. It reflects the reluctant subordination of the Indian woman. Her own individuality does not bring her any social status. Divorce in Indian society is considered as a social stigma that causes emotional and social devastation only for woman while husband remains unhurt. Deserted woman is seen as if she is affected by contaminated disease. It brings her only the sense of emotional and psychological alienation.

The novelist has presented Simrit as an embodiment of extraordinary will-power and unshakable determination. While parenting children, even in the most testifying situations, she does not lose courage. She becomes rather dynamic; as per the needs of the situations she seems to be assertive; if the situation demands, she turns to be aggressive. Her strength is also known by her husband:

“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.” (TDS, P.53)

The married life of Simrit Raman is void of affection, mutual love and respect. She is presented to be yearning for the emotional relationship and friendship which are just unreachable. It results in that she feels to be extremely suffocated within the domestic atmosphere. It causes the unpredicted imbalance in the matrimonial relationship. It gradually leads the married couple, Simrit Raman and Som Raman get divorced from each other. One of the root causes of such an end of their married life is the ideological differences between the husband and the wife: Som is materialistic, while Simrit represents idealism. Besides, there are differences in

their views, ways of thinking and their attitudes towards life. Simrit being an educated free lance writer desires for self-identification, self-actualization, gaiety and wants to have an ideal life, while her husband Som has overtaken her by his fierce personality. Som loves change, freshness and novelty. He wants his wife to be a submissive, always smiling and a confident son, while Simrit desires to romanticize Indian geography. She wants to give language to Himalaya; she wants to let rivers, forests and all sorts of beautiful things in nature speak. But the materialistic Som is unable to consider her plea. Som ironically considers woman to be a weaker sex having no choice. He thinks that the woman is to be dominated sex, the other. It reflects Som's gender bias mentality.

In the domestic affairs, Simrit can not even think about the decision making and having freedom of choice. She is not free to choose cushions, curtains and even servants. It is evident from the instance when she has dismissed the cook twice for his drunkard and clumsy behavior but Som reappoints him. Of course, for the woman like Simrit, it is really unbearable to survive in such torturing domestic atmosphere. That's why the husband and wife are compelled to be separated from each other. It is another thing that such a behavior of Som lifts him at the peak of success. But it is Simrit whose life is filled with deep despondency, listlessness, sighs and longings. She is psychologically tormented by Som's making weapons; she foresees the devastation and horror caused by the weapons. She imagines a dying woman with a shattered child. It allegorically symbolizes chaos and destruction caused by the material advancement. When Vetter insists her for medical checkup in Europe, she unconcernedly replies-

I know, but if everyone rushes to Europe for everything, if the whole universe revolves around Europe, then how's anything to grow in India, in Asia? Who is going to make it?

The lack of reciprocity and the communication gap between Som and Smirit terribly does pollute their married life. Som treats his wife as a worthless object and uses her only for his personal pleasures. He considers her to be his personal commodity. Mrs. Sahgal in her essay "Women: Person or Possessions", sarcastically



condemns such attitudes that value women as “property” and discourage woman’s individuality:

When I heard someone remark, “We never allow our daughters to go out” or “I can’t do that, my husband would not like it”, it sounded a very peculiar, alien jargon. As if, I thought, women were properties not persons. ( Sahgal, *Nayantara*, 1970)

Simrit, hurt and humiliated by Som’s patronizing attitude, has to silently suffer for seventeen years. It is because she has to survive in a patriarchal society where man’s self-proclaimed superiority is taken for granted. We are the witness of her anxiety and restlessness. She seems to be a caged bird struggling for breaking the bars so as to fly in the open sky.

Simrit struggles for her individual emancipation; she longs for her own identity; she wants her potentials and individual recognition to be granted in the patriarchal society. Hence, she has to overcome the man-made social norms and conditions; social opinions; social rigidity and orthodoxy. She has also to overcome her personal hesitation and reluctance. Divorce has completely separated her from Som, but she continues thinking of Som through her children. Hence, she is besieged by feelings of guilt. It is because, now she is associated with Raj. When Simrit meets Som to discuss the Consent Terms, Som’s meanness is fully exposed. Perhaps this may be the reason that liberates her from the feeling of remorse. 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.” (TDS, P. 208)

Her seeking divorce from Som represents her revolt against her being victimized by her patronizing husband. Her yearning for freedom and her quest for self-actualization reluctantly instigates her to get separated from her husband. Simrit does not want to be known by her husband’s name but she wants to establish her own identity. When she is asked 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. (TDS, P.6)

Nayantara Sahgal, by means of the character of Smirit mainly focuses on the plight of women after divorce. After divorce woman is caught in the crises. In the name of divorce settlement, she can get only a little amount i.e. so called alimony and that's all for her. Paradoxically man may improve his cast; he doesn't carry any burden or responsibility and can march towards the success. But it is the woman who is overburdened with the responsibility of children and home. Merilyn French puts forth the pathetic financial and socio-economical condition of the deserted woman and her children:

After, divorce in an overwhelming number of cases.... Men become singles and women become single mothers. Women's income declines by 75% in the first year after divorce; men's income increases by 42%. The father is better off, the children are often hungry. (French, Merilyn, 1986)

It is clear that Som is bent upon taking revenge on his financially unsound divorced wife. He imposes the heavy tax on her as per the Consent terms. She earnestly requests Som to amend the Consent terms to relieve her of financial burden. But her request is indiscriminately turned down by Som. G.P. Sharma comments on the prevailing barbarity in society:

"The trend of society has also been identified with barbarity and mammon worship becoming the fashion." (Sharma, G. P., 1978: 272)

Simrit is not an ordinary type of woman, but possesses potentials and uncommon individuality. Her uniqueness is also acknowledged by Moolchand, Som's company lawyer. At a meeting, while clarifying the Consent Terms to Simrit, Moolchand is extremely impressed by Simrit's unbelievable individuality and her 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.”(TDS, P.59)

Woman is biologically destined to become a mother. Woman is said to be a complete woman only when she begets a child. Here also she is expected to deliver a male child and if it happens, she is treated affectionately and kindly. To the contrary, if she begets a female child, she has directly or indirectly to go through psychological tortures. In fact all her in-laws and even husband might forget that it is man who is scientifically responsible for whether it is a male child or a female child.

This novel also touches the emotional victimization of the innocent children. Such victimization is caused by the gender discrimination in the patriarchal society. Simrit brings up her children but her son leaves her for his father's aristocracy and his father also forces a male child to come with him and leaves the girls at the care of their mother. For Som, girls are a burden as well as cause a lot of expenditure for their marriage. The novelist has placed Simrit in two different roles i.e. motherhood and her carrier. She is also clutched in the responsibility of nurturing and educating her children. Alvin Troffler observes:

Parenting is a shared responsibility and shared pleasure.  
(Troffler, Alvin, 1984)

However, Simrit, after getting separated from Som, on one hand feels herself emotionally and psychologically relieved, and on the other hand, she is free to determine the course of her future life.

... 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. (TDS, P.236)

The reason that compels Simrit to rebel against the conventional security of marriage is that she yearns for expressing her ideas with her husband. Unfortunately she can't enjoy such married life as Som does not have much interest in her. All the efforts of Simrit to establish reciprocal and emotional communication with Som prove to be abortive. Thus, to live with Som in such domestic



atmosphere become unbearable for her. She feels her married life to be a solitary confinement- the life that is void of emotional relationships; the life that is starving of mutual love; the life thirsty of spiritual joy i.e. the emptiness of married life.

In Indian culture, 'Marriage' is a kind of a close and intimate relationship between husband and wife. It is also expected to be based on the principles of equality and mutual love. In the act of marriage, of course two opposite personalities are tied together. Married life is really enjoyable and fruitful only if the 'otherness of the other' is respected. But we have always witnessed what really happens. This sacred bond is always exploited and misused by the husbands. Since childhood, male child is taught about his privileges and rights, whereas female child is taught about her duties. Though Sahgal's women are strong and self respecting, they depend upon men to get out of oppression and exploitation. They always depend on fathers or male friends who can help them to get out of different awful situations. In the novel, Simrit is morally supported by Raj, a Christian and Ramkrishnan, an intelligent philosopher. They show her a new direction to live a meaningful life. Later on Raj, the Christian and Simrit, the Hindu ties the matrimonial knot.

Raj is a mature person. He is interested in Simrit and loves her, though she is a middle-aged woman with several children. He respects her otherness; he intends:

"No handholding games with her. No games of any sort. With her it had to be on a long, strong basis." (TDS, P. 157)

Thus Mrs. Sahgal has created a world that is based on gender equality, the world exhibiting the mutual love between husbands and wives and the world sharing with harmony between the two sexes. The novelist urges to value the potentials and virtues of women equally as that of men.

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