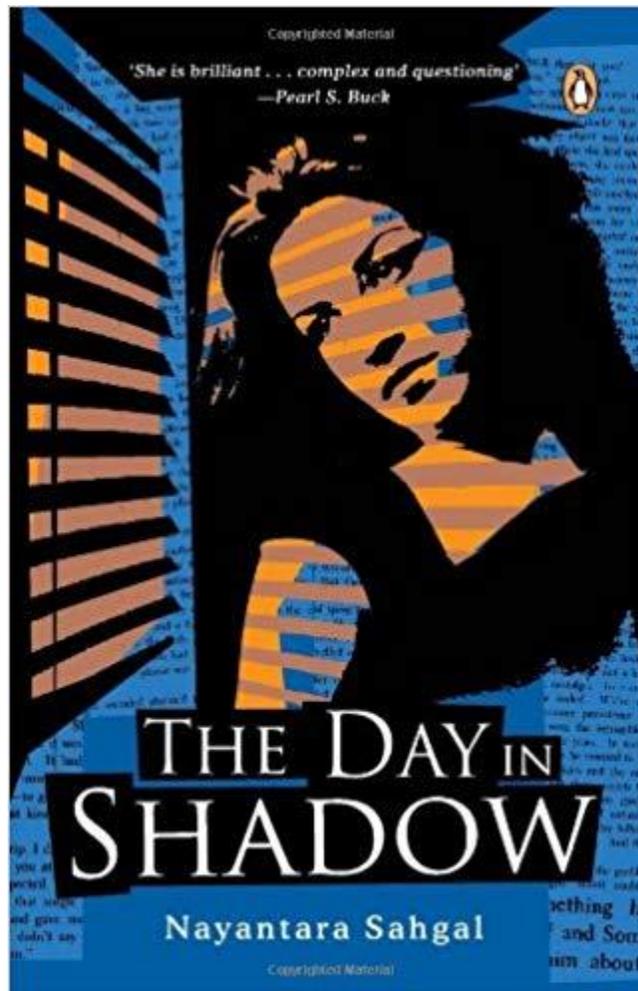


Emergence of New Women in the Select Novels of Nayantara Sahgal

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Courtesy: <https://www.amazon.in/Day-Shadow-Nayantara-Sahgal/dp/014015468X>

New Women – No Perfect Equality

Sahgal has a very different idea of virtuous woman, different from the stereotype virtuous women in India. But women in her novels represent different kinds of virtues. “A woman must be virtuous, chaste, submissive, homely, graceful and devoted to her husband and his family. She must seek pleasure in these relationships. The faintest of any

idea that every being exists primarily for the realization of oneself can never occur to her in the wildest of her dreams” (Akhileshwar 95). They do not suffer but take a stand. Indeed, she stands for the new morality, according to which woman is not to be taken as a mere toy, an object of lust and momentary pleasure, but man’s equal and honored partner

The new women long for love and communication from her husband. When the love is denied they refuse to surrender the conditioning factors of disgrace. They are mentally prepared to seek self-expression outside the bond of marital ties. They are self-respecting and self-assertive women and expect quality in marriage. They believe that marital relationships are established with the explicit purpose of providing companionship to each other in marriage. Sahgal brings home the essential truth that no man-woman relationship can exist on the principles of perfect equality. “If refusal to be crushed, the attempt to fight and voice protest is the core of feminism” (Bai 139). It is for a woman to have freedom and independence to lead an honourable life. There cannot be any doubt of Simrit possessing this in abundance.

Place and Role of Marriage - *The Day in Shadow*

Marriage, which has been seen as a traditional basis for man-woman relationship, may or may not provide the conditions necessary for individual growth. Arranged marriages ensured a minimum affinity of background but this was in no way an assurance of happiness. In *This Time of Morning* Sahgal widens her area of concern to the kind of freedom young women desire outside marriage. Nita and Rashmi are the products of changed social conditions. Simrit’s divorce in *The Day in Shadow* does not imply that marriage has failed as a social institution or that it has outlived its utility. “Though the first marriage with Som was like a canker in her life, the second marriage with Raj has given a solace and true meaning to the wounded life of Simrit” (Sylaja Web). On the other hand, it clearly demonstrates the need for reciprocal relationships in marriage.

Social and Emotional Perspective

Nayantara’s view point appears to be a desire to place marriage in the proper social and emotional perspective. She declares that in *Femina* “I have often wondered since at the lifelong damage this stem and implacable expectations inflicts on the young and sensitive, especially those young women who have just begun to spread their wings and had no time to discover even a fraction of themselves” (18). Man-Women relationships whether within or outside marriage needs to be liberated from conventional approaches to it in order to become a satisfying and fulfilling one. This relationship has been subjected to an unusual strain in a number of ways. Reviewer Rahul Singh, while conceding the fact that “Sahgal is the only Indian novelist in English who does not shy away from current political problems’ in her writing, comments rather nonchalantly: ...she is unable to sustain her theme and towards the end, the novel becomes something of a bore” (10).

The point of view is that of an observer-narrator whose participation in the action of the novel *A Time To Be Happy* is intermittent or most indirect as for example when he goes to the jail as freedom fighter or gets interested in the village industries as a Gandhian worker or makes an unconventional emotional response to Maya's predicament. Meenakshi Mukherjee rightly observes and says, "This indicates a definite confusion in technique because the narrators love for Maya contributes nothing to the total design of the novel and has no relation to Sanad Shivpals' personal crisis, which avowedly is what the novel is about" (49).

Anglo-Indian Characters

In regard to Sahgal's depiction of the Anglo-Indian characters in *A Time to be Happy*, E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India* seems to be the prototype. MacIver in Sahgal's novel comes very close to Fielding in Foster's novel, though the parallel is not absolute except in a certain breadth of outlook as when MacIvr says:

"The world is in need of a universal culture, a universal language, if not in the literal terms, at least in terms of thought and values" (148).

This Time of Morning

Mrs. Sahgal's artistic sensibility renders a fully integrated group of characters in the novel *This Time of Morning*. Thus even Uma is likely to go back to painting which is used to give her in the old days a feeling of freedom and a sense of release and a joy of working. Thus, Neil Berensen counsels her: "Go, back to it... So often one can't go back to a particular person or situation but one to art and musco and the writing of a poem. The years don't matter, except in the sense that they have enriched and added something, so one goes back with an advantage" (*TTM* 165). It is important at this stage, to correct what seems to be the most obnoxious and objectionable analysis of this novel *This Time of Morning* made by a German sociologist, Kai Nicholson in his book, *A presentation of social problems in the Indo-Anglican and Anglo-Indian Novels*. "Taking the cue from Lois Hartley's review of the novel, Kai argues that it is "a sociological study of urban characters in a contemporary India, rather than work of literature" (24).

The Day in Shadow

In *The Day in Shadow* Raj and Simrit plan to get married, they have enough assurance 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 super fluidity when divorce has become a social realism. What concerns Nayantara most, is the need for a mature approach to marriage, the need to nurture it with love, care and candour. She wants communication not flawlessness, 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 denied the right to self-expression. In her article *Women* Sahgal says that "When I heard someone remark; 'We don't allow our daughters to go out' or 'I can't do that, my husband

would not like it', it sounded a very peculiar jargon. As if I thought, women are property, not persons" (34).

The women who have strong, well developed characters defy both and are able to overcome their diffidence. Uma Mitra is likewise not truly liberated. It is women like Simrit, who are unable to conform to any pattern and are possessed by a searching need to be honest with their own selves and those around them. Nita moves towards self-awareness through uncertainty and bewilderment, while Rashmi moves to it through suffering and self-questioning in *This Time of Morning*.

Another person, whose move towards self-awareness is significant is Pixie in *The Day in Shadow*. She is different from the majority of Nayantara Sahgal's women characters. Sahgal says in her article *Passion*, "Her virtue is courage, which is willingness to risk the unknown and face the consequences" (84-85). She is a working girl without the security of an affluent family background and when she decides to cease her relationship with Sumer Singh she has to weigh it against her need for a job and a roof over her head. Her decision to breakaway is thus an act of unusual courage fulfilling a real need for self-realisation.

Leela's attitude to an extra-marital relationship in the novel *This Time of Morning* is one of self-deception and it is a mere habit, helping to keep her marriage on an even keel. There is no, excuse for them, Uma mitra enters into adulterous relationships in a spirit of revenge. Contrasted to her is Rashmi's relationship with Neil symbolizing a reawakening of desire, and the behaviour of Simrit for whom emotional involvement is prelude to sex. In each case, whatever Sahgal implies, should be judged on its own aesthetics whether it is 'guided by love and aspiration, or greed? Is there truth and beauty in it, or only desire for gain? This is the benchmark she applies to the attitudes and an act of her characters.

Simrit is liberated from her shackles only when she abandons the approach of conventional morality. It appears that sexual relationships in her novels have become acts of non-conformity and are free from moral under-tones or over-tones. Sex has ceased to be merely an appetite and has become a fulfillment and a renewal. Sahgal seeks to reinterpret the rigid concepts of virtue and chastity through her women characters who have a kind of 'untouched innocence and integrity'. It is also shared by Rashmi and Simrit who are all women are finally emerging from their shackles or chrysalis and whose urge toward freedom is symbolic for the need for freedom in every living being and they were not shattered.

Many Indian heroines are martyrs. Female self-sacrifice in the name of husband and nation is glorified. The concept of individual freedom continues to be the central concern of the novelist in all the novels. That is why her heroines, so deeply and loyally rooted in Indian culture, are portrayed to be struggling for freedom and trying to assert their

individuality in their own right. The concept of freedom continues to be the central concern of Sahgal's fiction. Raj and Simrit, who might have been the incarnations of Vishal Dubey and Saroj and Inder in *Storm in Chandigarh*, 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. These elements of character can be traced in her protagonists like Rashmi and Simrit. Sahgal opines in her article *Passion for India* thus:

In every novel, the heroine has moved up one step further away from the stereotype of the virtuous woman into a new definition of virtue, traditional virtue lies in staying but, suffering. The new woman does the opposite. No more Sati, she is determined to live, and to live in self-respect. Her virtue is courage, which is a willingness to risk the unknown and to face the consequences. (83-84)

The estrangement between man and woman, in these novels under study, has been treated with candid truthfulness and in realistic terms.

Dispassionate Honesty of the Novelist

One can, if one wished, dub and damn these characters using any epithet for them, say, deteriorate dishonest, frustrated, aimless, unrestrained, insane, nihilist, and infidel. But few can refute the dispassionate honesty of the novelist in treating the discordant relationships fictionally. Sahgal carefully avoids being sentimental, nor does she elude facing the situations and destinies. She has also been careful enough not to pronounce her value judgment from the ethical heights. She has only written stories of relationships-especially of incompatible or ill-matched couples, which were earlier considered as taboo for the Indian writer, particularly when the writer happened to be a woman.

Sahgal shows immense confidence in individual freedom and one of her twin themes that run through all her novels is man's growing awareness of the implications of freedom. Sethi says, "And it so happened with Nayantara Sahgal whose life has been entwined with India's Socio-Political culture. Her method is thorough and the ideas for freedom and liberation obvious in her writings which are deeply coherent to her emancipated family background" (1). Liberal in outlook, Sahgal believes in the "new humanism" and "new morality", according to which woman is not to be taken as a sex object and glamour girl, fed on fake dreams of perpetual youth, lulled into passive role that requires no individuality, but as man's equal and honored partner. Haralambos says, "When spouses live together, remain legally married but their marriage exists in name only" (360). Maya in *A Time to be Happy* realizes that a relationship is possible without the narrator, but she immediately erases this possibility as she feels her marriage ties are unbreakable.

Developing New Relationships

But Sahgal's later heroines like Rashmi, Saroj and Simrit consider other possibilities of developing new relationships outside marriages. Sahgal wants to reinterpret the rigid concepts of virtue and chastity through her women characters like Maya, Kusum, Rashmi, Saroj and Simrit. *The Day in Shadow* not only re-enacts the theme of marital disharmony but also has the sustained moral vision of the novelist. It delineates the emotional and efficient strains of divorce on a woman. Simrit is a passive woman and she let things happen, nothing seems to worry this woman. As Sahgal points out her own character Simrit in *The Day in Shadow* "She is a passive creature to whom things happen...Simrit is not an individual, a patient enduring passivity" (Johnusha 25). For Simrit, divorce does not bring freedom but confrontation with all that is orthodox in this man-centered society.

Out of this shackles there emerged a new-fangled Simrit – a person who makes option, takes decisions and becomes aware of herself as a person, first the mind, then the body opens 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. Sahgal confesses in an article *Of Divorce and Hindu Women*, "In this book I tried 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" (154). The marital discord was not due to any divergent pulls but due to the limitations of individual nature. Many reviewers consider this novel as an autobiography, Mukherjee chooses to treat it as "a novel and judges it by its intrinsic merit" (33).

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