

Feminist Perspective in Nayantara Sahgal's Novels *The Day In Shadow and A Time To Be Happy*

R. Muthu Selvi

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Abstract

Nayantara Sahgal is one of the great Indian novelists in English. She began writing when she was very young and became a professional writer in the post-Independence year. Her novels deal with men and women, especially women struggling against oppression and injustice heaped upon them in the name of tradition and culture. Nayantara portrays the inalienable right of freedom for women in many of the characters in her novels, such as Simrit in *The Day in shadow*, Saroj in *Storm in Chandigarh* and Rashmi in *This Time of Morning*. *A time to be Happy* (1958) and *Storm in Chandigarh* (1969) are classed as her political novels; *This Time of morning* (1965) *Storm in Chandigarh* (1969) and *The Day in Shadow* (1971) are autobiographical as far as they build on her own emotional experiences and conflicts. The later three novels published between 1985 and 1988 are markedly different from her earlier work as they move away from immediate political events to the early decades of the twentieth century. As a writer with feminist concerns, Nayantara Sahgal is a progeny of the tradition wherein power itself is deified as goddess 'sakti', a female symbol. Her fictional world is occupied by political leaders, business tycoons, foreign advisors, upper class people, journalists and highly qualified persons like ambassadors and ministers. A political theme is often combined to the theme of man-woman relationship, their marital problems, their temperamental incompatibility, the problems arising out of their submissiveness and finally the place of a woman in society. *The Day in Shadow* gives a sensitive account of the sufferings of a woman in Indian society when she opts to dissolve a seventeen year old marriage. A divorced woman is stigmatized forever and she is curiously watched by others as if divorce were "a disease that left pock marks". In *Time to be Happy*, Nayantara's main concern is with self expression within marriage. She describes marriage as a "life-long damage" if the other partner is not sensitive enough to communicate. Marriage is the unwritten law of most societies and very few do not subscribe to it. Sahgal presents couples from three generations and details their antithetical relationships. Thus Nayantara

Sahgal depicts the predicament of her women characters in both the novels. This paper titled Feministic Perspective in the two novels of Nayantara Sahgal, *A Time to be happy* and *The Day in shadow*. It deals with ‘Simrit’s Predicament in *The Day in Shadow*’. The third chapter deals with ‘Antithetical relationship in *A Time to Be Happy*’.

Keywords: Feministic perspective, Indian English fiction, Women in society, Nayantara Sahgal.

Rooted in Indian Civilization

Indian English literature is the expression of a sensibility firmly rooted in the traditional, going back to the very dawn of civilization and yet throbbing in its live links with the very modern and the contemporaneous. While the Indian English literature is intrinsically part of the continuum that constitutes the Indian mind-set, both thematically and stylistically the expression of this sensibility is in perfect consonance with the modern as well as the post modern framework. The Indian writer depicts Indian life and culture and reflects faithfully the life and spirit of the Indian ethos. He grapples with the problems and tensions generated by the rather unique way in which an individual’s life and character are determined by home, family and society in the Indian social milieu. It can be peculiarly Indian in respect of its form and narrative techniques employed and the manner in which the author adapts the English language to the native sensibility. It can be characteristically Indian in its moral and spiritual content to a very large extent. Women are an integral part of human civilization .No society or country can ever progress without an active participation of women in its overall development.

Pre- and Post-independence Feminists

The 1920s was a new era for Indian women and what is defined as “feminism” was responsible for the creation of localized women’s associations. These associations emphasize women’s education issues, develop livelihood strategies for working class women, and also organize national level women’s associations such as the All India Women’s Conference. Post-independence feminists began to redefine the extent to which women were allowed to engage in the workforce. Feminist class-consciousness also came into focus in the 1970s, with feminists recognizing the inequalities not just between men and women but also within power structures such as caste, tribe, language, religion, class and so on.

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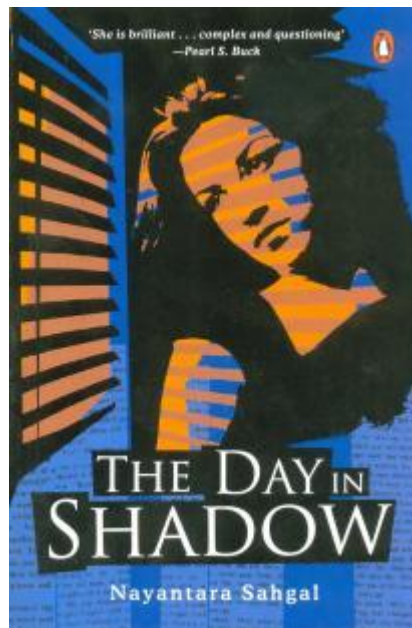
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Outside World

The meeting point between this life and the outside world, in Sahgal's novels, is politics or administration. So, the scene of action always is either the drawing rooms of a society lady, the bungalow of a minister or ambassador, the posh residence of a vice-chancellor, the office of a top officer, the party thrown by a climbing businessman or the neatly trimmed garden of an equally important person. And the things talked about are parties, varieties of wine, picnics, marital relationships, divorces, settlements, litigations, positions, politics and student-violence. It is just the stuff of restoration comedy of manners, with this difference, that politics is not part of the game of those comedies and that we don't find in Sahgal's *Devi*, *Saroj* or *Simrit*, the hypocrisy and smuttiness of a lady Wishfort or Mrs. Pinch-wife.

Simrit's Predicament in *The Day In Shadow*



Nayantara Sahgal's *The Day in Shadow* portrays the agonized experience of a divorced middle aged woman, Simrit. Her marriage with Som, an industrialist, turns out to be a disaster. In this novel Sahgal fictionalizes her own experience after divorce. The availability of abundant biographical material attests to the fact that in this novel she fantasizes what she missed in real life. Simrit has a fixed image of Som in her unconscious and makes it a point to read sinister meanings into what to Som seem the most innocuous of his actions and

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words. She was utterly unprepared to face the challenges of shared living during her adolescent years. Her “Scholarly” father and “unworldly mother” who had a tendency to withdraw from anything that was outside the orthodox Brahmanical principles could have hardly helped her to develop a realistic perspective on life.

Sensitive Account of the Suffering of Woman

The Day in Shadow gives a sensitive account of the suffering of a woman in Indian society when she opts to dissolve a seventeen year old marriage. A divorced woman is stigmatized forever and she is curiously watched by others as if divorce were “a disease that left pock marks”. (TDS 4) The mere habit of living with someone for many years makes it difficult for Simrit to accept the idea of living alone, all by herself.

Simrit feels that not only her intellectual needs but her emotional needs too remain unfulfilled in her status as a “happily” married woman. She however, never ceases to wish for their fulfillment. Her desire for the kindly attention of Som leads surprisingly enough to her frequent pregnancies. Simrit did not specially want a boy or another baby. But pregnancy had accidentally spread a feast before them, a lavish flowering sensuality that took all the time in the world to fulfil. It transformed Som, making him a little afraid and beautifully unsure. After the baby came he would go back, but while this lasted she made the most of it. She never told him she felt reckless, not fragile during these months. (TDS 25)

Som and His Wife Simrit

Som set a price for any work, just as a businessman. “Be tough. Be winner”. (TDS 69) That was his motto, no question of emotions, and sentiments. He batters his way through opposition. This is how Som dealt with his wife also. He could not understand the finer emotions of love, sympathy, understanding and friendship. Apart from his business acumen, these were things outside his realm. When Simrit expected such feelings from him, Som could not reciprocate. Her quiet resistance to his bullying, mentally and physically exasperated him. It was a blow to his male ego. So all the more he redoubled his malicious oppression with a vengeance. This is how Simrit also felt. She found him aloof. She had to take the little journey to be made each time to acceptance, to the moment of complete security. This feeling of security comes only when there is sympathy, understanding and especially friendship. Som would not speak business with Simrit, or in her presence. Perhaps

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he thought that business was something obscene and unmentionable or women were morons. So most of Som's life stayed cut off from her.

Talk is the Missing Link in Relationship

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 is isolated and ignored like a piece of furniture, but used for physical comfort whenever needed by Som. She suffers marriage therefore, as a solitary confinement of the human spirit instead of enjoying it as communion and a union of two human minds and spirits. Som's failure is, therefore, basically, of a bestial nature and forgivable insensitivity. Som is drenched in his affluent arrogance, sensuality and utter lack of refinement. Culture is beyond the ken of his understanding; sensuous response to the bounty of Nature is beyond his experience. Success and money at any cost are his goals in life: for example, Simrit recalls the days of his association with Vetter:

Simrit looked at Som during those days not always recognizing him. He had German phrases on the tip of his tongue and Vetter's mannerisms. He did most of his personal shopping in Europe. In a royal blue jacket, a French silk tie and handstitched Roman leather shoes he even looked foreign. (TDS 9)

Bound by Traditions

But he can never go away from the traditions of his own country. It is tradition in Som that urges him to believe that woman has to live under the control of man. He hates women's individuality and their freedom and believes in male domination to such an extent that he gives the least freedom to his wife. He expects her to conform to his ideal of subdued womanhood, and considers the inequality of their relationship to be the right order of things. Though he is modern in other aspects, when coming to husband-wife relationship he is completely traditional. He gives no voice to Simrit even in the ordinary decision of everyday life.

Simrit finds herself shut out of Som's world. He never consults her in any matter. "Her usefulness to him had never extended to areas of the mind" (TDS 77). Unable to withstand his "spiralling mania for affluence", she longs to isolate herself from his world of

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commerce. All her attempts to change him go awry. Som becomes furious at her protests and asks her either to be a docile wife or to finish off the whole farce of their marital relationship. She demonstrates that individual freedom is so precious that it should be compromised or allowed to be suppressed.

Orthodox Hindu Upbringing in Contrast to Som's Interest in Change

Simrit experiences her sense of failure as proceeding from Som. She is blissfully unaware that she is rejecting him, by such thoughtless acts as withholding sexual pleasure, but believes that he is rejecting her by denying equal status. Her secret desire to fail, this time as a wife, is thus unconsciously fulfilled by the above psychic mechanism. Her orthodox Hindu upbringing which has to a certain extent caused her passivity as Sahgal seems to think, is also responsible for her closing in on her final decision to divorce.

Simrit brings out the contrasting quality in Som who is interested in change, finding new things, new toys. Raj could not understand how Simrit could so unrealistic, being not aware of the punishment imposed upon her by husband, Som. The divorce terms dictated by Som are nothing but an outrage on the untrusting, unsuspecting innocent victim. She found that her callous husband had treated her in every other little thing the same way. She could not comprehend how an educated woman like her allows such injustices heaped upon her.

Vengeful Divorce Terms

At times Simrit appeared to Raj something like a child lost, patiently waiting somebody to say or guide what way or what to do. But she knew that she was basically tough; a toughness in out of integrity. She had known how to act. Raj was like a quality of strength. She deserved help. He would do what he could do to believe the situation. Simrit was trapped and maimed even after her divorce because of the settlement terms. Som imposed such cruel penalties on her to the taxation. He could have done it by some other humane ways. When Som explained the treachery, Simrit could not understand why Som should be so cruel and revengeful upon her. Som said it was more than a life sentence. Life sentence ends after a period of time. Hers was a real life sentence and it would be upon her until she died. Simrit had been having nightmares with a frightening clarity since her divorce. What wrong had she committed? Was it because she fought his injustice so stoically with self-composure? Did it exhibit his moral inferiority? Sahgal describes her feelings thus:

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Som could have forgiven her if she had been a weaker being. Unsure, dependent, even deceiving. But beneath her docility she was none of these things was unpardonable. And she could have loved him in spite of everything, if only sometimes she had fought him. (TDS 53)

Simrit found that she had to pay taxes for six lakhs worth of shares in her name. Som controlled her shares. Som argued reasonably, of course, that she had to pay taxes as the shares were in her name. It was a crippling burden she could not bear since most of her earnings by her work would be wiped away in paying the taxes. Som's revenge was to make her pay the taxes which he knew she could not; and any way enjoy the benefits of the shares. Simrit found that she had nothing to give her children expect herself. But would that be enough? Som controlled everything, cars, houses, bank accounts etc. Simrit on the suggestion of Raj met Moolchand, the lawyer who drafted Som's consent terms. She did not show any emotion when she described Som's conduct to the lawyer. It would be a wrong approach. Moolchand was impressed by her composure. His professional experience would have tackled an outburst or pleading even. But her matter of fact way in dealing with the affair unnerved him. He thought she was a cool customer.

Simrit's divorce leads to problems not only in coping with her own irrational fears and tensions, but also with society which does not recognize a woman's identity apart from her husband's. She is an "over-loaded donkey... 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". (TDS 56) Simrit's several pleas to relieve her of the tax onus go quite unheeded not only by Som, but even by the society at large. She feels her life with Som to be no different from her present existence: "May be she had always been an animal, only a nice, obedient, domestic one, sitting on a Cushion, doing as she was told. And in return she had been fed and sheltered". (TDS 54)

Male Chauvinism

In spite of some feminine sentiments expressed by Raj now and then, his total behaviour only reinforces the patriarchal myth of male chauvinism lording it over woman. Raj too has been very hesitant and uncertain in his feeling towards Simrit before he becomes aware of his love for her. Simrit and her problems occupy his mind all the time. He ponders

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over the extent and depth of his attachment to her. He firmly furnishes a pose of hegemony towards Simrit . What Simrit says or does is inferior, faulty and unimpressive. He almost oppresses Simrit with his discerning superiority. Language, which can be a bone of contention for two incongruous forces, here becomes solely a tool of patriarchal domination, never yielding place to “feminist resistance to oppression”. The novel is no doubt an epic on woman’s struggle against patriarchal domination and social construction. Simrit on her part avows her inferiority and confesses her ignorance. Simrit was actually attracted to Raj only by his language and she continues to regard his statements, however, shallow or partial it may be, as great or simply invaluable. Simrit is verily more aware of the injustice done by man, but habit makes her a willing prisoner of exploitation and injustice.

Raj and Simrit

Raj had claimed to recover Simrit for his own sake. Simrit fails to understand Raj’s biased nature. She blindly pays divine respect to him and feels lively in his company: A smile from him, as N. Shamota says “radiated an atmosphere of suppressed jubilation that lapped around her in waves”. (Shamota 106-107) Actually loyal to Raj, Simrit feels “Raj had uncarved her”, never for a jiffy suspecting that Raj might be only carving her into a shape he himself likes. She gets easily captivated by him and is completely under his influence.

Freedom of Women as the Focus

In *The Day in Shadow*, Nayantara Sahgal seems to be deeply concerned with the need of freedom for women. Simrit in this novel wants to land on her own feet and enjoy individuality, self-expression and self-confidence. 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.

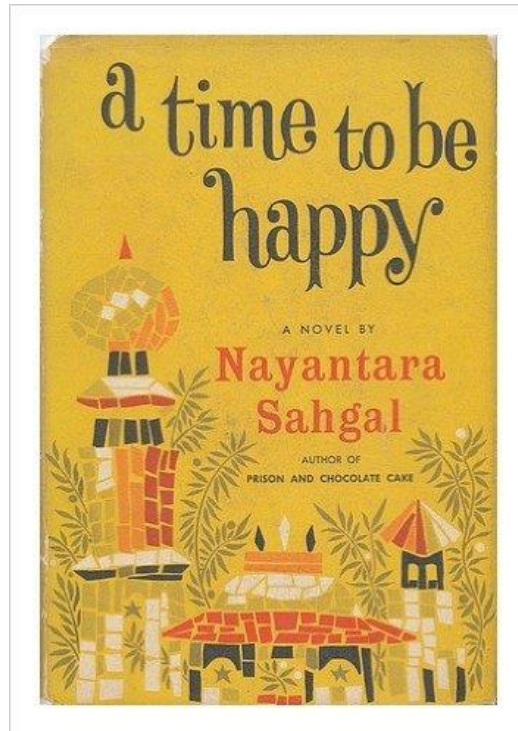
The novel exposes Simrit’s existence with Som and the cruel construction of the male society. Thus, Sahgal presents a new dimension to Indian English fiction through the exploration of the troubled sensibility, a typical new Indian phenomenon.

Antithetical Relationship in *A Time To Be Happy*

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A Time to be Happy (1958) seeks to alter the age old myth of female servitude being perpetuated by male hegemony which ironically borders on the marginalization of a woman's social sphere of existence. The novel reveals the sinister forces which are responsible for creating the crisis in a woman's identity. In the novel, Sahgal's purpose is not merely to depict the hooliganism and disorder in the educational institutions but to show that a woman has no place in a patriarchal set up. Thus, she has shown the reality of a woman's position in society. "Clearly Sahgal has very strong feelings about the wastage of young lives, especially women's lives". (TDS 60)

Westernized Youth

A Time to be Happy (1958) is a fictional enactment of the growth of a young, westernized and wealthy Indian against the back-drop of India's struggle for independence on the one hand and the smug nonchalance of the British Indian officers and their wives as well as their Indian admirers on the other. It is also on a different level, a submerged saga of Indian national movements with its inevitable and indelible impress upon the minds of countless comfortable upper middle class Indians, spanning a period of about sixteen years from 1932 to 1948. The novel is an imaginative recapitulation of things past with a somewhat ambiguous attitude towards the present, be it the Freedom Struggle or the Indo- British relations. This ambivalence Nayantara Sahgal achieves through the point of view of an

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intermittently omniscient observer, a middle aged bachelor who narrates the story with forward and backward leaps in time.

The Locale

The locale is, for most of the time, Sharanpur, a small town whose source of fortune is the textile industry, mostly owned by the British and a couple of rich Indian businessmen, namely, the narrator and Sir Harilal Matur. The concept of the unity of place is not strictly observed by Nayantara Sahgal in so far as she allows her characters to move in and move out of this small town in Uttar Pradesh, depending on the exigencies of the situation. The narrator at times is seen shunting between Lucknow and Sharanpur.

Dawn of Freedom?

The title of the novel *A Time to Be Happy* indicates there is a dawn of freedom, but its implications are ironic; the political freedom alone will not ensure real happiness in life, unless people have economic freedom and change their out-look on man woman relationship. In the novel, the action begins and ends on a symbolic note signifying the end of an era and a new beginning. The novel *A Time to Be Happy* is set in the immediate pre and post independent period and deals with the East-West encounter, the impact of English on western education, the burning desire for identity and roots, marriage and Hinduism.

Women Characters

The women characters too fall into two groups: the first includes those women who have been cast into the mould of Hindu orthodoxy since their childhood and they seek happiness in its total acceptance without questioning its ambivalent character; the second group is constituted of women who in the midst of the mechanism of a naturalistic environment try to adjust to the changing circumstances, but finding the whole universe structured on the principle of male-dominance, exhibit shades of rebellion. Their struggle does not aim at demolishing the traditional structure to identify themselves with modernity, but it is a plain refusal to be equated with the under-privileged groups like the minority races, in their own homes. They make a bid to liberate themselves from male-oppression and promote the ideals of self-reliance, self-sufficiency and self-respect by breaking down male-female stereotypes.

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Ammaji

Sahgal presents three generations of couples, all of whose marriages except that of Sanad and Kusum are arranged marriages.

The mother of the narrator and Ammaji, the mother of Govind Narayan, belong to the first generation. The narrator of the novel points out that his unorthodox father and his traditional mother are wonderfully suited to each other inspite of their disagreements, “as there must have been some in a marriage that lasted fifty years” (TH 8). His mother believes that the husband's concern was with God and the wife's *with God in him* (TH 7). As she compromised with her husband, there is no occasion for conflict. But Ammaji and her husband belong to two different worlds. She is a woman character “at a time when character was not admired in women of breeding”. (TH 28) Her husband is not only an “indolent pleasure loving man” (TH 28), but also a dashing boulevardier who cannot understand “her nun like disdain of luxury”. (TH 28) She refuses to submit to the mould in which he tries to cast her. Moreover she is bold enough to “criticize all that she disapproved of in her husband and his home”. (TH28) But they never think of raking the incompatibility as they believe that marriage is for life and “those who do not adjust to its ups and downs must forever remain unhappy”. (TH 13)

Ammaji, though she belongs to the older generation, has a strong will power to maintain her actual personality. Ammaji's husband like most men never tries to understand her emotions, desires and hopes. Instead he cleverly avoids situations which would create chances for any argument. Finally, she compromises to her lot and becomes passive like a typical Indian woman and this saves their bond from any possible damage. “All my needs are here within the house’ she declared. What is there for me in the world outside? You who are young must enjoy yourselves. For me the worldly life is over and the time of contemplation has begun”. (TH 29)

Lakshmi

Lakshmi, the wife of Govind Narayan and Maya, the wife of Harish belong to the second generation. Lakshmi's marriage to Govind Narayan is an arranged marriage which is often considered:

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a solid stable structure, true and tried, built on the theory that affection and mutual regard could reasonably be expected to flourish between partners of the same social, religious and provincial background.

(Sahgal 51)

Lakshmi is a "person content to be a woman, glorying in her femininity" (TH 73) whereas Govind Narayan, is a person who is "Still living in the era of Nawabs". (TH 4) They are well matched to each other that there is no occasion for them to face any serious conflict.

But Maya is the predecessor of Mrs.Sahgal's women protagonists who are the victims of matrimonial incompatibility.

Maya

Maya is a woman of 'character' who is not willing to submerge her individuality. Maya Shivpal is the first character of Sahgal who starts the journey towards self- realization. Maya has enjoyed a rich and happy background with her parents before marriage. Her presence has been very much enjoyed by the family members. Her individual interests and wishes have been honoured at home. But her marriage to Harish is doomed right from the beginning. Sahgal shows great sympathy for women who are married into backgrounds different from their own. They need time and understanding from their husbands, at the least to adjust to their new environment but they rarely get these comforts.

Maya finds out that she can easily communicate with the narrator and they fall in love. But she cannot think of a divorce. She does not try to escape and have an extra marital affair. The Narrator cannot express his love for her as both of them have tremendous belief in the indissolubility of marriage. It takes a long time for the Narrator to regain the ground and to conduct himself with her in a casual way. In an introspective mood, he questions: "What should I have done? Begged her to go away with me? Continued to see her and love her, at no matter what cost? Such solutions are for fairy tales. Reality is framed in another perspective altogether". (TH 69) As he wants to withdraw himself from the embarrassing encounters with Maya, he makes himself more involved in the activities of congress as a volunteer, as a result of which Maya has to lead a life of alienation and isolation.

Maya surprises the reader with her singularity. She is not antagonistic, but she is detached from her surroundings. She finds herself like a fish out of water and she is unable to

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remain silent and satisfied by serving her husband like the Narrator's mother. She could not live as the shadow of her husband. She is a woman with ambitions and aspirations. Her dreams of self-determination and self-realization take her to rural India. She has a natural instinct towards social work and she feels very much contented with her service in the villages.

Maya's husband, Harish feels more at home in Paris and Rome than in India. He and his wife Maya live in two different worlds. He gives more importance to money and power than human feelings. Maya's expectations in life are more psychological. Harish and Maya are antithetical personalities. They are a mismatched couple as “she isn't interested in anything Harish likes. She never goes to the club with him, and she is always tongue-tied at parties”. (TH 33)

Maya is influenced by the narrator and seems to find her soul-mate in him. They know that they love each other, but the moment of this realization of their love contains both the beginning and the end of this relationship. They know the marriage ties are indissoluble and there is no way out for them. She is not the 'new woman' to defy convention. She controls her mind and frees herself from the arms of the narrator. She finds a novel way to self fulfillment by joining the freedom movement and preaching Gandhian ideology to simple village folk.

Kusum

The marital relationship between Sanad and Kusum though it had a felt some connection at the initial stage, is maintained only because of the patience of Kusum. Though she has no interest in the world of Sanad for the sake of maintaining marital harmony, she changes herself to the level of attending clubs, wearing high heels and drinking cocktails. Their marital relationship is saved as Kusum has learnt the art of being accommodative. Jain says:

The clash of their expectations, however does take place in them, because Sanad by his determined quest for an identity and a sense of selfhood is able to reach so much that lies beyond the limited world of his upbringing. (Jain 89)

The change in Kusum is a silent transformation from one world to another. There is no conflict, rebellion or bitterness in her. She is able to establish herself and her house in the way she would have liked to, and is happy in her own inexpressive and quiet world, quite different from the aristocratic grandeur of her mother's house, with its priceless objects of art, expensive carpets and palatial buildings. Finally, Sanad and Kusum discover each other because they have discovered the truth about themselves.

In the Background of the Quit India Movement

A Time to Be Happy is set in the background of the Quit India Movement. There are some older generation couples and some modern couples in the novel. Though all the couples appear to be happy, they have pain deep down in their hearts. Except Sanad and Kusum's marriage all other marriages are arranged marriages. All the marriages survive till the end and the marital bond is not broken in any of the cases. But that is not proof that all the couples are happy. The marital agreement is maintained because of the social conventions and the moral fear of the society. Though they are not soul-mates to each other and howsoever wrong their match may be, the women in this novel do not dare to come out of their homes or to break their marriages ties.

Feminist Writer

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. A Feminist is a person, male or female, who is concerned with the status of women, and who advocates or works for the removal of all forms of discrimination and oppression of women, so that they may live in a milieu of freedom, dignity and equality with men. Viewed from this angle, *The Day in Shadow* and *A Time to Be Happy* can truly be identified as feminist novels and its writer, Nayantara Sahgal, as a feminist writer. Thus taken together, *A Time to Be Happy* and *The day in Shadow*, give us a good measure of Sahgal's artistic maturity and achievement even, as she portrays the suppression of a woman's individuality and her aspirations in most Indian marriages.

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R. Muthu Selvi
Assistant Professor of English
Ayya Nadar Janaki Ammal College
Sivakasi 626123
Tamilnadu
India
sekarselvittl@gmail.com

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