

Conflict between tradition and modernity in Nayantara Sahgal's "The day in shadow"

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Abstract

Nayantara Sahgal a prominent Indian English women novelist. Her novels depict on the premise of multicolored female characters, marital tension and domestic traumas understands the tradition and modernity. Sahgal entre fictional corpus revolves around the twin themes on political and the tradition and modernity. Nayantara Sahgal's fourth novel "The Day in Shadow (1971)" presents the theme on freedom for women to become aware of themselves as individuals along with tradition and modernity. The main characters of the novel Som, Raj, Simrit, Sumer Singh, Brij and Ram Krishnan behave like moderns but at the same time find it quite difficult to isolate themselves completely from the age-old traditions of their own country. The protagonist emerges from the shadows to find happiness. It explores the women, how she came out from the patriarchal society.

Keywords: tradition, modernity, freedom

Introduction

The day in shadow primarily deals with the struggle of a young, beautiful and daring Indian woman trapped under the burden of a brutal divorce settlement and the agony and unhappiness. Simrit experiences in the hands of cruel and unjust male dominated society of India. The novel exposes the life of the political leaders, business barons, journalists, and free thinkers in the bee and flow of the daily living in New Delhi. Nayantara Sahgal's had presented the social life of these people living in India in the early sixties when India was on her way to progress after the attainment of independence. The novelist shows that though Indians had got freedom yet it was only on the surface level as in their attitudes to love, morality, sex, marriage, education and religion, they were still the slaves of the west.

The theme of the tradition and modernity had been continued by Nayantara Sahgal's in "The day in shadow". The main characters of the novel Som, Raj, Simrit, Sumer Singh, Brij and Ram Krishna behave like moderns but at the same time find it quite difficult to isolate themselves completely from the age old traditions to their own country. It had got its precious past. Though being the capital city of India, it had now become completely a modern city "blossoming into new street lighting, fountains and parks, restaurants, shops and discotheques" bearing no resemblance to the sad, dark, stricken Delhi of the refugee migration just after independence but it was still proud of its mosques, temples and other historical places. Undoubtedly its past was lost in antiquity and it had not remained the same virtuous place running a slow and smooth life. Now the life here was full of confusion, chaos and disorder and "there was a vigour and vulgarity about Delhi today-as there was about any process of growth and change." The day in shadow opens with a gala get-together at intercontinental and very first sentences of the novel underlines the glow, the glitter of this modern society of the capital city of India;

"The huge mirrors of the zodiac room at the intercontinental, festooned in carved gilt, reflected everyone of consequence in the ministry of petroleum, and a lot of other officials besides. And their wives. And some of their daughters-the supple, flat-stomached young, with their saris tied low showing their navels, their hair swinging long and loose, or piled high in glassy architecture."(1)

All this shows the superficial modernity of the Indian people who blindly imitate western style in their fashions and manners, little knowing that these things are taking them away from the traditions and customs of their own country. Trimmed hair, slim body and naked stomachs are considered to be signs of modernity. Similarly, in order to be modern, these people arrange parties and spend money plentifully. They believe that a man living in Delhi has got to attend parties to know more and more people. Raj wants Simrit to go out of the house so often and meet more and more people though Simrit feels out of place in such parties. In the same way, the Indians also go for holidaying like the foreigners. In such a modern society vulgarity is considered to be a sign of modernity. We find Som kissing his wife in the presence of his friend Lalli. In the same way Simrit's friends don't like her ex-husband Som as they consider him to be a bore. According to these people;

"A man had to be flashy on a big scale to be thought well off, and majestically vulgar to be admired, and Som had not arrived in that category."(4)

It was not that all the characters come in this very category. There was Shaila also who was quite traditional in her views and when Raj holds her arms in the market she asked him not to do and says that by holding her arm in the public he was creating a scene. Moreover, it was one's reputation and the

labels that help one in solving the problems. Simrit was hiding problems in getting telephone connection because she was not an accredited journalist and she thinks;

“What mattered was the one in the garage, the kind and quantity that burred and whirred in one’s kitchen, the artificial temperature a machine kept in one’s bedroom.”(61)

When at first met som find difficult in talking with Lalli in Punjabi but later in the novel he learns German phrases while in the contact of his friend Vetter. He wanted to be look like a foreigner in his mannerisms also moreover, in Delhi the reputation of a civil servant has nothing to do with his merits but he must be good English diction and good manners. In the day in shadow there was not a single character that can say completely modern or traditional. Almost all the major characters were a mixture of both these elements. They were modern in some aspects but traditional, or can side to be orthodox, in many other things. For example, there was som who tries to be modern in each and every manner and blindly imitates the western style of life. He speaks their language, learns their mannerisms and adopts their fashions. As Simrit recalls;

“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 hand stitched roman leather shoes he even looked foreigner.”(9)

But he could never go away from the tradition of his own country. It was tradition in som that urges him to believe that women had 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 him least freedom to his ideal of subdued womanhood, and considers the inequality of the relationship to be the right order of things. Through notice that the tradition within som for example, he was modern in other aspects, when coming to husband-wife relationship he was completely traditional. He gives no voice to Simrit even in the ordinary decisions of everyday life:

“Even their som had a veto. Not even about servants, she had dismissed the cook twice for drunkenness and bad behavior and som had kept him on.”

Simrit was also a blend of both the tradition and modern elements. She wants individuality and freedom, feels suffocated and unhappy in the husband centre world and takes divorce from Som. Thus she rebels against the conventional security of marriage as she yearns for free communication of ideas with her husband beyond the glandular sensations of sex. In this respect she was an awakened woman of the modern age who shows the courage of mind after the divorce and it was tradition in her that makes her feel that by taking divorce she had offended something old and ordained.

“A part of her would always be married to Som.”(220)

Simrit could never went away from the old tradition and customs of her own country like modern women. The sacred

institution of marriage had also come under the impact of modernism. In traditional Indian society, marriage was arranged by the parents and after marriage the husband and the wife had to live with each other under all circumstances. It was considered to be a contract or bondage made in the presence of does which had to be obeyed. But in the modern society, people don’t believe in arranged marriages in the novel “the day in shadow”. Simrit gets married to som, a businessman, against the will of her Brahmin parents. She remains unhappy with this marriage and ultimately takes divorce from her husband. After her divorce from Som, she plans to marry raj. So marriage in the modern society was fixed by man himself and not by god as it was thought in the traditional Indian society. Simrit was an educated woman who yearns for a free communication of ideas with her husband but feels isolated 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 was fed up with this life and takes divorce from her husband. Divorce had become quite easy in the modern days, the easiest one. Simrit says that it takes a year to get a Birla car, five to get a flat but:

“You could get a divorce by mutual consent at the drop of a hat. The Hindu code bill had jumped two thousand years of tradition to confer that particular twentieth century blessing.”(5)

In the matters of man woman relationship and even in the laws established by the government, people had double standards. For example, no doubt divorce was made so easy and common by law in the modern society but it was not so easy a decision in such a society where women had stayed married no matter how unhappy and confining their marriage had been. In the terms of divorce settlement were harsh and involve a heavy responsibility for taxes in the care of simirt though law had changed but not the attitudes of the people. Simrit feels uprooted and abandoned in the male dominated world as she finds that nobody tries to see divorce from her point of view, as a person seeking freedom and fulfillment. Both moolchand and shah saw nothing wrong with the divorce settlement though it is a complete injustice with Simrit. So even law does not do justice with a woman in this society. As the society was male-dominated where all the laws were made by the man himself. There was no doubt in modern man had changed a lot but he had still not gave up that old traditional view of considering woman as an object possession. After the divorce of Som and Simrit. Ram Krishnan rightly says:

“The Hindu woman traditionally has no rights apart from what her father or her husband chooses to bestow on her. The law has changed some of that, but attitudes haven’t changed much, which is clear from the husband’s attitude in this case and the court’s acceptance of such a document. A woman can apparently still be used as a convenience for tax purpose by her husband even after he has divorced her. (168)”

Like in her earlier novels, in The Day in shadow also, Nayantara Sahgal’s seems to be deeply concerned with the need of freedom for woman. Saroj and now Simrit and pixie in

this novel want to stand on their own feet and enjoy individuality, self-expression and self-dependence. It was 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 there yourself, fully a person, not to be asked what you did? There was such an enormous separating gulf between herself and this woman, most woman-most people. Maybe 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."(6)

She was an earning lady and could easily stand on her feet. Pixie in this novel also moves towards self awareness but she was quite different from Nayantara Sahgal's other women characters. She was a working girl who does not had security of an affluent background. When she decides to break her relationship with Sumer Singh she had to think about it against her need for a job and a roof over her head. But still she decides to break which shows her courage to seek self-realization. Similar, after a lot of struggle, Simrit also turns out to be a woman who can make choices, takes decisions and makes up her mind to start life a new with raj from which she could get what she longs for and expects from her husband love, warmth, affection and understanding. Modern man was becoming more materialistic. He gave more importance to money and power than human feelings. For men like som, money was the most important thing in life and this love for money becomes the root cause of his separation from his wife. Simrit feels:

"Money had been part of the texture of her relationship with som, an emotional, forceful ingredient of it, intimately tied to his self esteem. Money was, after all, a form of pride, even of violence."(60)

Man had become so much money minded that there was no place left for human feelings and emotions in his heart. He weighs everything with money. Even husband wife relation and father son relation were weighed in terms of money. Som feels that money could give happiness to Simrit. To notice that when his children win prizes, som award them with money other material things and not with love and affection. Som could go to all extents to get more money. It was too earned more and more that he breaks relations with his friends Lilli and Vetter. Even Brij was fascinated by that the money world, and decides to ignore his mother's side of the case as he thinks that it may upset his relations with his father, "it was too big a risk. He didn't dare." Simrit's daughter also lives in the dream world of affluence projected by the rich advertisements in the magazine. But no one pays any attention to anything of value: emotions, involvement and attachment, and only the superficial acts of life engage their attention. In the traditional Indian society extra marital relations were considered immoral but such relations were becoming quite common in the modern society. In "the day in shadow", raj and Simrit were having an affair though Simrit was divorced as a mother of so many children. Earlier raj was having a relationship with

Shaila and even after her marriage with another man he longs to meet her. Similarly Summer Singh had physical relations with pixie and so many other girls. Though the people were becoming modern in every possible manner. In some cases they don't want to shed their traditional attitudes. For example, in the modern times though people were educated, they were still UN willing to understand that there was no difference between a son and daughter. A male heir was considered very important in a family. People gave more importance to sons. That can be seen in som and Simrit that though they were having so many daughters and only one son, Brij, som shows no affection for his daughters and was considerate only to his son. Even after the divorce he cares only for Brij. In the traditional Indian society, religion strongly influenced in the minds of the people. People used to have strong faith in the theory of "Karma" and they accept their fate willingly. They used to have full faith in the supreme power of god. In the day in shadow, there were such characters like Sumer Singh's father who believes that if there was any taint in his son, "Only providence or a miracle would put it right". Similarly when Simrit was thinking about Brij's moving towards his father, raj tells: "Some power outside her controlled it all. Not god or any rational conception. Just fate," Simrit willingly accepts the tax terms as she believes that it was in her fate. But science had influenced the minds of the people in the modern society and they have "their new ideas and awareness of the presence of reality as an undeniable fact" Simrit accepts everything as her fate. But ram Krishna and raj wish Simrit to take a stand against injustice and not to yield to a sense of helplessness and victimization. Raj refuses to accept fate as an answer to human problems. Ram Krishna tells Simrit:

"Retribution catches up with people who do not face a problem. Religions are supposed to help one to face up. Religions are like public schools. Each produces a type, a uniform personality. The type ours produces doesn't face up it puts problems into cold storage..... But I've found a way out of that..... To fight wronga man has to believe it is terribly important to fight it."(233-34)

He identifies religion with devotion to do good. Doing good to the people of god was the real devotion of god: people like myself and Simrit and so many others. Ram Krishna pondered, are deeply religious. That awareness of good, of god, of the universe, whatever one called it., was pervasive and supreme. It descended to the dust of the village. It was everywhere. It had to be made to yield results, to become a song on one's lips, a great fighting strength and it was not today. Thus Nayantara Sahgal's concept of religion was secular religion as she gave importance to men as human beings. To conclude, though mainly the novel revolves around Simrit and her struggle for a new life the novelist had also successfully handled the modern life of political leaders in the urbanized society of New Delhi and had launched a fierce attack on the imitative superficial world.

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