



**A FEMINIST APPROACH TO NAYANTARA SEHGAL’S “THE DAY IN SHADOW”**

**Dr. Felix Nayak**

*Assistant Professor & Head, Department of English, Mahant Laxmi Narayan Das College,  
Raipur (C.G.)*

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Email: [info@jusres.com](mailto:info@jusres.com)

Nayantara Sehgal’s “The Day in Shadow” is not a feminist novel. In fairness to Sehgal, it is not even intended to be one. It is a woman’s novel and looked at from the angle of a woman; the novel contains traces of feminism. Sehgal definitely succeeds in arousing the consciousness of women and making them aware of their actual position in society. The novel provides a sensitive account of the suffering of a woman in Indian society when she opts to do away with a marriage seventeen years old. After being separated, she faces problems not only in coping with her own fears and tensions but also with society which does not recognize a woman’s identity apart from her husband’s. A divorced woman is considered to be an outcaste and she is curiously watched by others as if “divorce were a disease that left pock marks”<sup>1</sup>. The mere habit of living with someone for many years, makes it difficult for the protagonist to digest the idea of living alone, all by herself. The frightening dream that she has dreamt of gives the reader an idea of her inner disintegration where pain follows her life like a shadow never leaving her even for a moment.

Outraged at the brutal implications of their dream, Smriti feels very diminished and humiliated. Left to find her own means to keep life going the protagonist finds herself in a situation where she is unable to decide as to which course she should adopt to come out of the dark cell into which she has fallen. Woman has always been considered as a burden. In the renewed anguish, while talking to Som’s Lawyer she sees her life with Som as no different from her present one. The agony that the woman feels after separation in Indian society comes directly from the private

world of the author in whose life divorce was still a recent happening. Coming from the first-hand experience of the author, the description of Smriti’s suffering has an intensity which can carry the reader along and which also gives the impression of the novel being a feminist work. However, the rest of the novel is far from being a feminist narrative.

Smriti looks like a ‘liberated’ woman who has the courage to break a long relationship which has become meaningless with no sense of companionship or partnership between husband and wife. But she goes in for separation when already another male support is waiting for her outside marriage. The situation, in fact is rather a fantasy. She steps out of the sheltered world of Som not to live a life on her own, in her own way but to step into the shadow of another man. She really does not have to struggle alone for survival, neither at the economic level nor at the emotional one which leaves woman even more disintegrated and vulnerable. In Indian society where men hesitate to marry even a widow with a child, what to talk of a divorcee? Can the reader really find a man who will so readily embrace a middle-aged woman with economic liabilities and a host of children to take care of?

It is, in fact, the character of Raj that makes the novel, if not as anti-feminist text, at least an embarrassment for feminist. Despite some feminist sentiments expressed by him, now and then, his total behaviour merely reinforces the patriarchal myth of man’s superiority over woman. He does feel genuinely concerned about Smriti at times. He seems to respect her independence and her individuality. It was not a question of Smriti for himself – at least not until he had some sign from her. It was Smriti for herself, he wanted Smriti to forsake her shadows and begin to live. However, the patriarchal attitudes are so deeply imprinted in him that they have become a natural part of his personality. He constantly maintains a state of superiority towards Smriti. Anything that Smriti says or does is inferior, faulty and unimpressive. His assumption is that Smriti has not lived simply because so far she has not lived the way he thinks life should be lived. He almost bullies Smriti with his intellectual superiority. For all his claims of concern for Smriti, one wonders whether a person like Raj can understand or share her agony and tension. Standing on the high pedestal he has chosen for himself, can he ever be a partner or companion to Smriti. The climax of Raj’s dominating attitude comes with his one-sided announcement of marriage before Ram Krishnan. Raj who had claimed to retrieve Smriti for her own sake, ironically, does not even ask her about marriage, a decision even Smriti feels was supposed to be at least mutual. The need for marriage is actually desperately felt by Raj rather than by Smriti, who had already

tasted this institutionalized relationship for too long to be tempted into another such bond so soon. Once this ‘Sign’ of love has come from Smriti, Raj like any other male starts taking her for granted. Raj’s belief in the patriarchal set-up with its unequal gender roles is so deep-rooted that he finds nothing unnatural in this kind of commanding of woman.

Smriti fails to see Raj’s prejudice, bias and superficialities. She blindly adores him and feels delighted in his company. She is taken aback at the abrupt announcement of marriage, yet surprisingly no protest comes forth from her. Smriti’s over-dependence on Raj is a central paradox in the novel. In a narrative full of ironic situations and characters, one is surprised by a total lack of irony from the author at any level. And it is this absence of irony which makes the novel so oblivious to sex discrimination in power division. At any level, in the absence of irony, it remains a novel by a woman, about a woman, when contrary to woman’s cause the status-quo is uncritically accepted as some inevitable law.

#### **REFERENCES**

- 1.Nayantara Sehgal, *The Day in Shadow*, Delhi, Vikas, 1975 P-4
- 2.Mukerji, K. Raj, *Women and cultural change*, New Delhi, Macmillan, India, 1979, P-187.