



Breaking patriarchal cycles: A re-reading of Nayantara Sahgal's 'The Day in Shadow' through the lens of cycling as a metaphor for liberation and self-hood

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Abstract

Nayantara Sahgal's 'The Day in Shadow' presents a powerful exploration of feminine autonomy and independence through the lens of marital dissolution and personal liberation. While cycling itself is not explicitly a dominant textual element in the novel, the broader symbolism of movement, freedom, and self-directed journey that characterizes the bicycle as a literary motif mirrors Simrit Raman's psychological and physical navigation towards selfhood. This article presents that the novel's thematic preoccupation with female independence and agency operates as an implicit cycling narrative where the protagonist pedals her way through societal constraints, divorce settlements, and patriarchal expectations to achieve authentic selfhood. Through close textual analysis and feminist literary theory, this paper examines how Sahgal constructs a narrative of emancipation that embodies the liberating essence traditionally associated with cycling in literature: autonomy, resilience and Self-hood.

Keywords: Cycling, patriarchy, marital subjugation, woman's agency, divorce, liberation, self-hood, autonomy

Introduction

Bicycles in literature have long served as powerful symbols of freedom, independence, and the capacity of individuals to chart their own trajectories. From the rebellious protagonists of coming-of-age narratives to characters seeking escape from oppressive circumstances, the bicycle represents more than mere transportation. It embodies agency, autonomy and the physical manifestation of will. While Nayantara Sahgal's 'The Day in Shadow' does not foreground cycling as a literal plot device, its thematic architecture closely parallels the symbolic journey undertaken by cyclists in literature: Simrit Raman's passage from domestic servitude to autonomous selfhood mirrors the pedal-by-pedal progression towards liberation inherent in cycling narratives.

Nayantara Sahgal, a prominent Indian English novelist and political activist, has consistently centered her fiction on the struggles of educated, self-esteemed women navigating the oppressive structures of patriarchal Indian society. Born into a family intimately connected to India's independence movement and the intellectual circles, Sahgal brings a distinctive consciousness to her exploration of domestic relationships'. 'The Day in Shadow' stands as her most explicit autobiographical work, reflecting the author's own experience of divorce and the fraught negotiations between personal liberation and social ostracism deeply rooted in Indian society.

The novel's protagonist, Simrit, occupies a liminal space between tradition and modernity, obedience and rebellion, marital duties and selfhood. Through the extended narrative of her seventeen-year marriage to Som Raman, her decision to seek divorce, and her subsequent struggle to rebuild her life amid societal condemnation and financial entrapment, Sahgal crafts a portrait of a woman who must, metaphorically, propel herself forward through relentless efforts, navigating obstacles with persistence and determination. This article contends that Simrit's journey towards authentic selfhood, her refusal to remain stationary within patriarchal structures constitutes a symbolic cycling

narrative wherein freedom, resilience, and agency become the coordinates of her emotional and existential geography. Before examining the liberatory symbolism implicit in Simrit's journey, it is necessary to understand the nature of the patriarchal machinery from which she must extricate herself. Som Raman is represented as an embodiment of patriarchal consciousness disguised in the trappings of modernity. Though Som is portrayed as a cosmopolitan and progressive individual who, adopts German phrases, engages in international business, and maintains an affectation of Western sophistication, his actual treatment of Simrit reveals the constancy of patriarchal values beneath superficial modernization. His conviction that "woman in the home, is a good, sound idea"; reflects an unexamined misogyny that persists even within self-proclaimed liberal consciousness.

The relationship between Simrit and Som deteriorates precisely at the junctures where Simrit attempts intellectual engagement and meaningful arguments. Som's refusal to communicate with his wife on substantive matters. His dismissal of her concerns regarding the moral implications and his disregard for her intellectual contributions systematically renders her invisible as a thinking subject. Instead, Som relates to Simrit exclusively through sexual interaction, treating her body as a site of gratification while denying recognition to her mind and emotional interiority. This reductive containment of female subjectivity within the domestic and physical spheres constitutes what might be termed the 'stasis' of patriarchy: an insistence that women remain fixed within prescribed roles, unable to move beyond the boundaries of home, motherhood, and male desire.

Divorce, then, becomes not merely a personal decision but a radical act of self-propulsion against this immobilizing system. Simrit's determination to dissolve the marriage and to literally uncouple herself from Som represents a refusal to remain stationary, to continue pedaling in circles within the confines of marital subjugation. Yet the novel's genius lies in its unflinching exposure of how patriarchal structures do

not simply vanish upon the dissolution of marriage; rather, they reconstitute themselves through legal instruments and social condemnation. The divorce settlement itself becomes another form of entrapment, one that paradoxically requires Simrit to accept legal ownership of property holdings that generate onerous tax liabilities, a brilliant narrative choice that demonstrates how the apparatus of patriarchy adapts and persists even after the explicit marital bond has been severed.

The symbolic resonance of cycling as a motif of liberation derives from its essential characteristics: the requirement of sustained effort, the capacity for self-direction, and the achievement of momentum through one's own exertions. A cyclist cannot remain stationary indefinitely; the bicycle demands perpetual forward motion lest it topples. Similarly, Simrit, once separated from Som, propels herself forward through deliberate action and sustained determination. The novel repeatedly emphasizes her physical and emotional "toughness of unshattered integrity" as the essential quality that enables her survival and eventual flourishing.

While Som tries to immobilize Simrit within fixed marital roles and subjugation, her journey towards autonomy is well portrayed precisely with persistent, self-directed movement symbolized by cycling. Early in her life following divorce, Simrit faces formidable obstacles: the sting of social ostracization, the burden of childcare undertaken alone, the complexity of financial obligations imposed by an unjust settlement, and the internal psychological trauma of negotiating her identity beyond the framework of wife and mother. The novel presents these challenges not as momentary difficulties to be overcome but as the necessary resistance encountered by any individual pedaling against the headwinds of societal expectations and patriarchal inertia.

Crucially, Simrit's journey towards selfhood is not characterized by passive acceptance or victimhood. Rather, the novel emphasizes her active agency in directing her own course. She writes, works, builds intellectual friendships, and maintains custody of her children through her own efforts rather than through reliance on male protection. This sustained activity, this perpetual forward motion constitutes the substance of her liberation. The metaphor of cycling is apt because it resists romantic notions of effortless transcendence; instead, it acknowledges that freedom requires work, persistence, and the continuous exercise of will against resistance.

The relationship between Simrit and Raj, the politically engaged intellectual who becomes her intimate companion, further illuminates the cycling metaphor. Raj enters Simrit's narrative not as a savior who rescues her from difficulty but as a fellow traveller who recognizes her capacity for autonomous movement. He supports her efforts to negotiate the tax settlement, encourages her intellectual pursuits, and ultimately offers partnership based on mutual respect and shared conviction regarding freedom and social justice. Importantly, when Raj proposes marriage, Simrit initially rejects the idea, recognizing that to immediately couple herself with another man would constitute a return to the immobilizing structures she has worked so strenuously to escape. Her insistence on autonomy on the right to make decisions "of her own free will, in her own good time" reflects the fundamental principle underlying the bicycle metaphor: that the power and agency to move forward must reside with the individual traveler.

The novel's title, 'The Day in Shadow', evokes temporal ambiguity and existential liminality. A day in shadow is neither fully dark nor fully light; it exists in the interstitial space where clarity remains elusive yet darkness has not fully descended. For Simrit, divorce initiates precisely such an ambiguous temporal state. The marital structures that once provided (however inadequately) a framework for identity have dissolved, yet the new landscape of autonomous selfhood remains incompletely visible and fraught with uncertainty.

Yet this shadowed temporality also contains liberatory potential. The novel's subtle temporal poetics suggest that remaining in shadow in the liminal space between traditional femininity and authentic selfhood permits Simrit to escape the rigid categories that patriarchal vision attempts to impose. Where Som's world is starkly illuminated by the glare of material ambition and imperial will, Simrit's shadow-world permits multiplicity, possibility, and the gradual accumulation of selfhood through lived experience rather than assigned identity. The metaphor of cycling accommodates this temporal complexity, just as the cyclist moves through landscape, encountering alternating zones of light and shadow, never remaining fixed within a single moment or illumination, Simrit also confronts the joys and sorrows in her life's journey.

Furthermore, the shadow motif resonates with Simrit's internal psychological journey. Her nightmares following divorce reveal the depth of her traumatic displacement; yet the novel suggests that working through this internal darkness facing the frightening machinery of her own psyche constitutes a necessary stage in the journey towards authentic consciousness. Like a cyclist riding through the darkness towards dawn, Simrit pedals through psychological tribulations and reaches a horizon of clear understanding of selfhood and authentic agency.

Nayantara Sahgal's 'The Day in Shadow' ultimately presents a vision of feminine resilience and liberation through Simrit's refusal to remain stationary within the confines of marital subjugation. The novel implicitly embraces the symbolism of cycling; the image of a woman who propels herself forward through deliberate action, who navigates obstacles through persistence rather than passive suffering, and who insists upon her right to self-hood.

The cycling metaphor proves particularly apt for Sahgal's project because it resists both the melodrama of victimhood and the false promise of instantaneous transcendence. The cyclist must work continuously against gravity and inertia; she must balance competing forces; she must remain in motion to avoid collapse. Similarly, Simrit's achievement of selfhood is not a moment of epiphanic revelation but rather the gradual accumulation of brave acts of resistance, self-assertion, and determined forward motion. In this respect, Sahgal's novel stands as a powerful refutation of patriarchal fantasies that imagine women's happiness residing in permanent attachment to male protection and authority.

The significance of 'The Day in Shadow' extends beyond its autobiographical particulars to engage broader questions regarding the possibilities for feminine agency within postcolonial Indian society. By centering her narrative on a woman's refusal to accept the immobilizing structures of loveless marriage and patriarchal authority, Sahgal asserts that individual freedom constitutes a prerequisite for authentic social and political engagement. Simrit's insistence on her right to autonomy to make decisions about

marriage, property, and identity according to her own judgments is an exemplary propelling identity to realise the uniqueness of Self-hood.

Finally, Simrit emerges from the shadows not as a figure of tragic resignation but as a woman who has learned to ride free, who has discovered that the capacity to generate momentum to her inner- self is navigated and propelled within her. This vision of feminine selfhood, grounded in sustained effort and autonomous agency rather than romantic fantasy, offers a compelling alternative to patriarchal narratives that would contain women within fixed categories and immobilizing roles. Through Sahgal's artistry, the bicycle's symbolism of freedom, resilience, and self-directed movement becomes a master metaphor for the difficult yet necessary journey towards authentic feminine subjectivity and autonomous being.

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