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Marriage and Divorce over the Decades: An Analysis of the portrayal of Marital Relationships in Select Indian English Fictions

Kaushik Chatterjee

Abstract: *The institution of marriage developed early in human society had its foundations in love, companionship, commitment, and mutual respect. The traditional view of marriage in India saw the institution as a bond for several lives. With exalted status given to men, the institution extended limited agency to women. Divorce became heavily stigmatized and discouraged. The issue of marital conflict is one of the dominant themes in Indian English fiction. Raja Rao, Arun Joshi, Kamala Markandaya, Nayantara Sahgal, Ruth Praver Jhabvala, Bhabani Bhattacharya, Shobhaa De, Anita Desai, and many others frequently have used the theme of marriage and divorce as one of the central motifs in their works. The paper discusses marital strife in *The Serpent and the Rope* by Raja Rao and *The Day in Shadow* by Nayantara Sahgal. Raja Rao's novel was published in 1960, and Nayantara Sahgal's book was published in 1971. The paper discusses the theme of marriage and divorce in the two novels published a decade apart to examine whether the approach to marriage and marital differences has changed in a decade as represented in literature.*

Key Words: *Marriage, Economy, Tradition, Divorce, Agency,*

Since the dawn of human society, the concept of marriage has been introduced and practiced. Marriage seems a timeless institution that serves as the foundation for the union of two people, which is often

founded on love, commitment, and mutual respect. At its foundation, marriage entails the shared beliefs, hopes, and aspirations of two people who choose to embark on a journey together, supporting each other through life's highs and lows. It provides a framework for emotional support, camaraderie, and closeness, allowing people to have a strong sense of belonging and security. Marriage also develops a sense of togetherness by fusing two different lives into one, forging a path of shared experiences, responsibilities, and decision-making. As a celebration of love and commitment, it also extends beyond the couple, encompassing their families, friends, and society. While the institution of marriage has evolved through time to adapt to cultural, social, and legal changes, its core essence remains constant— an enduring relationship based on love, trust, and a vow to embark on life's journey together.

In traditional Indian society, influenced by texts like the *Manusmriti* and various other *Dharmashastras*, marriage was regarded as a lifelong bond, often depicted as spanning seven births. Beliefs like this stressed the sanctity and permanence of marriage, emphasizing its enduring nature. Within this traditional religious framework, women often had limited agency, as divorce was heavily stigmatized and discouraged. The emphasis was on maintaining the marital union at all costs, with societal pressure to uphold family honour and continuity. This perspective reflects broader patriarchal norms still prevalent in Indian society, where women's autonomy and rights are often subordinated to familial and societal expectations. A point of agreement between the traditional Indian view of marriage, emphasizing its enduring nature and societal stability, and Marxist theory can be found in the understanding of marriage as an institution shaped by economic and social factors. Marxist theory views marriage as deeply intertwined with the economic structure of society, serving to reproduce labour and maintain class inequalities. Similarly, the traditional Indian view of marriage, with its emphasis on

familial ties and continuity, can be seen as serving the interest of the socio-economic system by preserving family wealth and social status across generations. Additionally, both perspectives recognize the role of societal norms and expectations in shaping marital relationships. While the traditional Indian view may emphasize the importance of family honor and social cohesion, Marxist theory highlights how these norms are often constructed to maintain existing power structures and economic relations. Citing a number of reasons influenced by various historical, cultural, and social factors, Frederic Engels, the renowned political theorist and sociologist, was of the opinion that marriage is not a reconciliation of man and woman but the subjugation of woman at the hands of man. And, as a result woman often, in order to get rid of marital suffocation tend to liberate themselves from the clutches of patriarchal society. Since the idea of marriage and constancy in love has undergone a sea change, women have started venting their thoughts and desires. With some amount of economic freedom, women have changed the basic rules somewhat. If a self-sufficient woman with a roof over her chooses to marry, it is because she wants to share her life with someone in the fullest sense and not because she is looking for a lifelong meal-ticket. Divorce, too gets to be viewed in this light. A woman of independent means is no longer compelled to perpetuate a bad marriage.

The issues of marital conflict dominate Indian English fictions in one way or another. Raja Rao, Arun Joshi, Kamala Markandaya, Nayantara Sahgal, Ruth Praver Jhabvala, Bhabani Bhattacharya, Shobhaa De, Anita Desai, and others frequently use the theme of marriage and divorce as one of the major motifs in their works. *The Serpent and the Rope* by Raja Rao and *The Day in Shadow* by Nayantara Sahgal, written decades apart, are the subjects of my current work, which examine the marital strife that has resulted in divorce over the years.

Raja Rao in *The Serpent and the Rope* states:

Woman is the earth, air, ether, sound; woman is the microcosm of the mind, the articulation of space, the knowing in knowledge; the woman is fire, movement, clear and rapid as the mountain stream; the woman is that which sseks against that which is sought. To Mitra she is Varuna, to Indra she is Agni, to Rama she is Sita, to Krishna she is Radha. [...] Woman is kingdom, solitude, time; woman is growth, the gods, inherence; the woman is death, for it is through woman that one isborn; woman rules, for it is she, the universe. (Rao 352-353).

The Serpent and the Rope presents two opposing worldviews and epistemologies in its tale of love, marriage, and divorce between Madeleine, French girl and Rama, an Indian student. The novel addresses the subject of marital estrangement due to temperamental and philosophical disagreements. Madeleine first meets Rama while they were both students at the University of Caen, and four years later they eventually got married. Given that she becomes a professor at a university in the south of France and that he has been working on a thesis on the Albigensian heresy, the marriage appears to thrive in an intellectual and academic environment. Rama and Madeleine attempt a synthesis of the ideals of the different cultures they have descended from while being cognizant of the contrasts in the epistemologies they represent and of their respective Indianness and Frenchness. They make an effort to give their son Pierre Krishna and themselves a dual identity that is both natural and cultural. Rama, like his creator, was raised, educated, and lived in both the East and the West, making him equally at home in both. Vedantic by nature, he serves as an example of the need to

view human culture as a whole. Madeleine does her best to comprehend his Brahminic teachings. She is unaffected by his periods of intense seriousness and infantile simplicity, his swinging between extremes of unrestrained sensuality and excessive asceticism, and his transition from exquisite sainthood to crass irresponsibility.

The contrasts and complexities that result from a temperament moulded by Sanskrit, French, and Indian philosophy, as well as an inherited system of intertwined social and religious relationships, make our efforts at effective knowledge of the entire fictive system appear insurmountable. What Rama depicts is not faith or freedom in the traditional religious perspective, but an introspective way of life, a monistic vision based on a fundamental mythic structure. To really appreciate and understand Rama's way of life, one must, like Rama, belong to that compelling heritage. Rama's philosophical monism, which has shaped his unique perspective on life, stands in stark contrast to Madeleine's aggressive, pragmatic, and dualistic mindset. Nonetheless, she makes every effort to accommodate to her Vedantic husband's peculiarities, his inability to face reality, his avoidance of decisions and responsibilities, and his vegetarianism. In the initial years, it seems to both of them that their marriage can transcend ethnic, sexual, and cultural barriers. For instance, just as he feels at home with Marie de France and Baudelaire, and at the chapel at Montpalais as well as the Cathedral at Auch, Madeleine also joins him in his Hindu games of make-believe, making votive offerings to the rock elephant on the hill and Nandi the bull at the villa St. Anne's door.

Nevertheless, the marriage of Rama and Madeleine is destined to fail due to their temperamental and philosophical incompatibility. Shattered by her repeated failings, Madeleine turns to Buddhism, where compassion and sympathy cast a profound spell on her. "It is all a ghost story- Rama, India" she writes to Catherine and adds "contemplation is the only truth

one has" (Rao 394). But she initially fails to free herself from both constrictive intellectual lifestyle and marital confinement. As she puts it, "Sometimes Rama, I want to run away from you, run far away from you, just to listen to the stupid innocent laughter, like Tante Zoubies; or go to a circus and see the clown make everyone laugh" (Rao 135). Madeleine slowly starts contesting the sacramental nature of marriage. She even considers the word "touch" to be evil even before getting divorced. Eventually, she severs her spiritual and psychological ties with Ramaswamy and consequently finds peace in her self-imposed isolation. She asks Rama for divorce to free her from the entanglements that obstruct the advancement of her spiritual journey. A typical Westerner, she associates sex with sin and concupiscence. Rama, after the divorce, turns to Savithri for love. The Savithri- Rama relationship forms the crux of the story in the second-half of the novel. Savitri becomes a channel of Rama's entry into a state where he transcends the dimensions of the ego-idea, and annihilates time and space. The relationship with Savithri gives Rama a new dimension to his otherwise ruffled marital existence.

The tragedy of their marriage is that it mutilates and dooms Madeleine. She is ruined because of the duplicity of her husband, who takes pleasure in his role of a Krishna, a mentor and guide. For Rama the act of love becomes a sacred orgy. Marriage in the novel often becomes a crisis for both Rama and Madeleine. C.D Narasimhaiah, in this context points out that the failure of Madeleine's marriage is not due to a single cause exclusively, such as Raja Rao's understanding and sympathetic portrayal of female characters. It is not due to the feeble mingling of cultures, though it is there; but primarily because true marriage is possible only when the ego is dead and when the duality of life is resolved into one unified sensibility. Despite the fact that the two are divorced, Madeleine divorces Rama out of love rather than with any resentment for him. She distances herself from Rama in order to find salvation on her own and

refuses to identify herself with Rama as a true Indian wife should. In this case, Madeleine benefits from divorce since it finally allows her to emerge as a distinct person. Rama also in the end departs for India alone, abandoning Madeleine behind, which reinforces justifications in the traditional shade of gender roles and power dynamics. Madeline, representing worldly attachments and domesticity, is left behind as Rama embarks on his spiritual journey, symbolizing the prioritization of masculine pursuit over the concerns and desires of women. This patriarchal worldview where women are expected to sacrifice their own aspirations for the fulfillment of men's spiritual or worldly goals raises questions about agency and autonomy for women in marital relationships.

The Day in Shadow, a highly personal book by Nayantara Sahgal, reveals more than just an emotional holocaust. It depicts the tragic predicament of women in a male-dominated society quite accurately and in detail. In the prison house of a loveless marriage, the female protagonist of this novel encounters conflict, frustration, a protracted period of stress, and bitterness. The book also demonstrates the protagonist's growth through her difficult experiences and eventual discovery of a solid sense of self. Sahgal immediately states that she attempted to make sense of her own traumatic experience of divorce in this novel *The Day in Shadow*. She aimed to demonstrate how a woman can be illegally exploited even in a free nation like ours where women are supposed to be treated equally. The condition of Simrit, the protagonist of the novel, "had always been an animal, only a nice, obedient domestic one, sitting on a cushion, doing as she was told" (Sahgal 57). She falls prey to Som's charms and marries him against the will of her Brahmin parents but finally becomes the victim of his whims. Simrit becomes increasingly depressed as Som treats her not as a person but as a possession. Sahgal regards Som as a typical chauvinistic representative of ruthless, self-centered anglicized business

tycoons, belonging to the he-man school, whose male dominance is the most formidable cult. She finds herself unable to respond to her husband's physical needs and remains "separate, excluded, rebellious" (Sahgal 90). Simrit withdraws from him emotionally, which naturally impairs their physical relationship too. He feels insulted at her physical withdrawal, reacts wildly and walks out of her life. Simrit is extremely upset and has no choice but to file for divorce. Simrit's desire for a free exchange of ideas with her spouse outside of the grandiose sensation of sex is ultimately what drives her to rebel against her marriage's restrictions. The lack of warmth, communication, compatibility, and equality between their conjugal relationships ruined their marriage and led to their divorce.

Divorce, for Simrit, does not lead to freedom but rather conflict with everything that is conventional in our male-centered culture. Her life becomes disorganised as a result of the divorce, and owing to her signing of the "consent terms" voluntarily, she now faces financial difficulties. Simrit finds herself in an inescapable situation of a trapped animal as a result of her divorce rather than in the realm of freedom. For her, it was by no means simple. It was painful how the connection continued, like a detached heartbeat. Simrit encounters difficulties on building a new life for herself as a writer and for her children. She has so many daughters and only one son, Brij. Som shows no affection for his daughters and is considerate only to his son. Even after the divorce he cares only for Brij. The daughters do not bother much for her, for they have their own life to live. And, the son who is fascinated by his father's world likes to spend more time with his father than with the mother, who seems to be, according to her own children, "an overloaded donkey" (Sahgal 56). A heavy tax liability is imposed by Som on Simrit in the form of a corpus of six lakhs, which his son, Brij, would inherit at the age of twenty-five. But his financial settlements enslave her with taxes and

make it impossible for her to make a decent living. She soon realizes that it is basically a “husband-centered world” where a free woman has no place (Sahgal 59).

The main issue, according to Sahgal, is that divorce as if for women is by nature sinful, and to take her portion of the blame, Simrit remains silent and consents to the arrangement, accepting it as her “Karma”. Out of this fight for freedom, a new Simrit emerges—a person who can choose, decide, and recognise herself as a person.

First the mind and then the body open up to new responses and life affirms itself in a new sense of fulfillment in her relationship with Raj which is an involving and equaling one. He seems to respect her independence and her individuality. One wonders that a person like Raj can understand or share her agony and tensions. Standing on the high pedestal he has chosen for himself a partner or companion to Simrit. But she, oppressed by her immediate problems, says “I feel so disorganized” (Sahgal 14).

The point of suffering is blown aside by the wind of words, in her fight against the injustice that makes women both helpless and hapless.

However, through the portrayal of divorce Sahagal does not question against marriage as a social institution, neither does she imply that marriage has outlived its utilitarian social bonding, but she in this novel illustrates the need for reciprocal connections in marriage. Marriage is not a form of servitude or a means of emancipation. It is not even a social contract, and approaching it in that way is also improper. It is rather a collaborative relationship that depends on both parties participating. Sahgal thus strengthens his case for reform and the revival of Indian society through Simrit's divorce. Simrit gives off the impression of being a “free” lady with the guts to end a protracted marriage.

In conclusion, though Madeleine and Simrit initially face significant

turmoil due to their marital dissolution, they eventually confront the challenges of getting divorced by forging their own identities. They had to face many problems, conflicts, frustrations and stress in their married lives but these hardships moulded their individuality and enabled them to find a stable identity of their own. The analysis of marital relationships portrayed in these Indian English fictions reveals a complex interplay of societal norms, individual desires, and a quest for personal identity. Marriage, traditionally seen as a union of love, commitment, and mutual respect, is depicted as both a source of fulfillment and conflict in these narratives. However, underlying the romanticized notion of marriage is the harsh reality of gender dynamics and power imbalances. Women like Madeleine and Simrit grapple with societal expectations, male dominance and personal aspirations within the confines of marriage. Their struggles reflect the broader condition of women in a patriarchal society, where marriage often becomes a site of subjugation rather than partnership. Divorce from an ill marriage emerges as liberating yet challenging path for these women, enabling them to reclaim agency and self-identity. Their journeys toward self-discovery and independence underscore the resilience and strength of women in navigating the complexities of marital dissolution.

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