

## NAYANTARA SAHGAL'S *RICH LIKE US*: DEPICTION OF HORRIFYING EFFECTS OF EMERGENCY

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**Abstract:**

*Nayantara Sahgal, an eminent Indo-English writer is well-known for novels. Though her novels are on different themes, the portrayal of politics is dominant. Politics is inextricably interwoven in her novels and Rick Like Us is not an exception. This paper examines the horrifying effects of the emergency in Rich Like Us.*

**Key words:** Novel, politics, emergency

**Introduction:**

Nayantara Sahgal is one of the eminent Indo-English writers who projected national consciousness. Though she has written biographies, political commentaries, and articles in newspapers and magazines, she is known more for her novels. She portrayed different phases of history and politics when contemporary novelists dealing with the themes such as cultural problems, revolution, industrialization, deprivation, economic problems, etc.

Politics is inseparable in her novels and the reason could be that she belongs to the Nehru-Gandhi family. She is the daughter of Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru's sister Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit and cousin of Indira Gandhi. Being part of such a family, she has seen politics closely and influenced by the Gandhian ideology and freedom moment as she said in the preface of *Prison and Chocolate Cake* (Sahgal, 1954: vii), "We grew up at a time when India was the stage for a great political drama, and we shall always remain a little dazzled by the performance we have seen".

Sahgal is the first women novelist of Indo-English literature dealing with the political theme. She portrays politics brilliantly as she belongs to a political family. The portrayal of politics in her novel is natural and we can see it vividly. To her, "political awareness was a gradual and unconscious process and the most important influence in our live" as stated in *Prison and Chocolate Cake* (Sahgal, 1954: 18). She describes the condition of the nation and puts her observations with first-hand knowledge. She analyses politics through her characters. Thus, she is chiefly known for the political portrayal as A. V. Krishna Rao (1976: 6) observes, "Nayantara Sahgal is perhaps one of our best socio-political

novelists today". Precisely, politics is inextricably interwoven in the novels of Nayantara Sahgal and her novel *Rich Like Us* is not an exception.

**Rich Like Us:**

*Rich Like Us* is one of the best novels of Nayantara Sahgal, which won the Sinclair Fiction Prize and the Sahitya Akademi Award. The novel is about the two worlds - the world of woman-man relationships and the world of politics. It is a novel with the plurality of narration and does not end straight forward as Jasbir Jain (1990: 34) observes, "*Rich Like Us* offers no easy solutions to mankind's problems...it challenges all known solutions...is about the complex nature of reality". Like other novels, Sahgal deals with different phases of history in *Rich Like Us*. It covers the period from 1932 to 1975 and shows the picture of the pre and post-independence era. The novel sets in the seventies when the real goal of the freedom movement was forgotten. It projects national consciousness, presenting the state of the nation before and after the independence. Though the novel opens in the post-independence period, it goes back to the pre-independence era to highlight the values in politics.

Even if the novel presents the picture of post-independent India, the prime focus is on the emergency imposed for the period 1975-1977 by Indira Gandhi, then the Prime Minister of India to protect her position. We see the presence of Indira Gandhi in the novel, but she does not appear as a character, or she is not identified by name. Sahgal depicts Indira Gandhi as 'madam' and Sanjay Gandhi as 'madam's son'. It states that the emergency is at the centre of the novel and the novel exposes "objectives and functioning of the emergency" (Mathur, 1991:69). In brief, the novel provides a real account of the emergency and its brutality.

**Depiction of horrifying effects of emergency in Rich Like Us:**

The novel *Rich Like Us* provides a detailed account of emergency and its horrifying effects – illegal mass detention, ceasing fundamental rights, censorship, cancellation of elections, ban on strike, human rights violation, vasectomy, slum eviction, widespread corruption, ferocious power of the police, illegal promotion, etc. It shows the brutality

of the emergency and suppression of rights of the citizens where thousands of people were held under detention without trial.

The novel is with dual narration – Sonali, the main character, is the first-person narrator, and the other one is the omniscient narrator. The flow of actions swings between the past and present through two characters i.e. heroines – Rose and Sonali. Sahgal discovers the power of freedom through the heroines as well as the minor characters like Kishorilal.

The horrifying effects of the emergency on all the sections of society are presented through the characters. We can see the impact of emergency almost in all characters. The characters are projected at two levels – at the masses and the individual. This divides the nation into two – foreign returned and elite class i.e. India, and poor, oppressed mass population i.e. Bharat. These two are contrasting worlds, but Sahgal very vividly depicts the suffering of both during the emergency, distinguishing western and oriental culture.

The emergency disturbed more who resist it and didn't reconcile to it. Sonali, the main character suffers a lot due to the emergency. She is intellectual and independent who represents the women of modern Indian. She suffers as she avoids working in favour of the political boss. She suffers because she rejects the proposal of a multinational company to produce Happyola, a fizzy drink adhering to the Government's industrial policy. She is punished by transfer and demotion. "Ten minutes later a phone call informed me I was to go back to a posting to my State where, I already knew, and the Union government certainly knew, there was no vacancy at my level. I hadn't merely been transferred without warning, I had been demoted, punished, and humiliated, and I had no inkling why." (Sahgal, 1985: 27) It shows, during an emergency the world's largest democracy was with the dictatorship.

Rose, is another main character who suffers due to the emergency. She is London-born, second wife of Ram, a rich businessman. She is humiliated and robbed by Dev, an active supporter of emergency. Beggar, though it is a minor character, is a powerful symbol of the suffering of the masses due to the emergency.

The novel shows the demotion of life and the loss of ideology through the portrayal of the character Ravi Kachru. He is a former classmate of Sonali who was once a staunch supporter of ideology now ready to compromise for personal growth. He was a committed communist when he was in Oxford as

Sonali pointed "Even when we did not agree with him, he was the inspiration of all us radicals, and we never did understand why instead of throwing in his lot with the Communists after Oxford he changed his mind and joined the civil service, as I, in search of another kind of involvement, had already decided to do" (Sahgal, 1985: 102). But, within a few years, he is one of the favorites of PM. It reveals the dark side of Indian politics that how it is difficult to be with one's own ideology.

The novel puts the comments on the disintegration of values. It talks about the loss of democratic values as democracy is nothing but a power game. Sonali recalls her past when she topped the civil service examination. On this, her father with tears in his eyes thought that her new responsibility could bring a new change - "Sonali, people like you, especially women like you, are going to Indianize India" (Sahgal, 1985: 24). But the reality is something different.

Though the novel deals with the impact of the emergency on the number of characters also shows their responses When Sonali realizes the corrupt environment, she decides not to be silent and fight against the system. "The Emergency had finished my career, but suddenly I didn't want a career in the crumbling unprofessionalism that bowed and scraped to a bogus emergency." (Sahgal, 1985: 31) Sonali's journey is from the disappointing administrative officer to renewed hope for life.

As socio-political disturbances always affect more on women, the emergency also affected more on women. We can see this effect in the characters - Sonali, Rose, Mona, Nishi, and Marcella. They try for positive change in their lives, but circumstances do not allow them. They are very sensitive to the changing environment. They put struggle to survive with dignity in adverse situations, but they couldn't succeed. The novel focuses on the suffering of women depicting the prevailing condition of the state. It projects the failure, frustrations, and exploitation of women due to the emergency in particular and politics in general. Sonali represents modern Indian women who suffered a lot due to the ups and downs in politics. Sahgal exposes the oppression of Indian women in nationalistic politics as pointed by Ramesh Chadha (1991: 261) "along with the political themes, she [Sahgal] also portrays the modern Indian woman's search for individual freedom and self-realization."

Though the novel shows strong concern for the woman's plight, it deals mainly with the elite and rich. It shows how affluent society is involved in

politics. "... and we joined ours seamlessly to the present. The civil service was part of the join. So were English, Parliament, Commonwealth and the Word of Lord Jesus Christ." (Sahgal, 1985: 148) It talks more about higher caste, upper-middle-class, politically well-connected but less about the masses such as labourers, tailors, beggars, etc.

Like characters, Sahgal used various symbols to show the horrifying effects of the emergency. Foremost is the use of broken and disabled bodies. The broken and disabled bodies symbolise the brutal state of emergency. Sara Ahmad (2006: 111) writes, "Bodies are capable of remembering histories, even when we forget them". Thus, through the broken and disabled bodies, we see the horrifying effects of the emergency.

The novel also refers to the most frightening aspect of the emergency - slum clearance and enforced sterilization. Referring to vasectomy camps, Sonali says, "It did not need much imagination to sense the hate and fear inside the vans with iron-barred windows, like the ones used for collecting stray dogs for drowning, that now roamed the streets picking up citizens for vasectomy" (Sahgal, 1985: 23).

It shows how the nation was divided under the emergency into two – supporters and oppositions. As an active supporter, Dev justifies the detention of people, "...this emergency is just what we needed. The troublemakers are in jail. An opposition is something we never needed. The way the country's being run now, with one person giving the orders, and no one being allowed to make a fuss about it in the Cabinet or in Parliament, means things can go full steam ahead without delays and weighing pros and cons for ever. Strikes are banned. It's going to be very good for business." (Sahgal, 1985: 8) The opposite voice we can see in Sonali, when she says: "Since June 26th officially all was well, but it was impossible not to be aware of the sullenness building up along New Delhi's heavily policed roads, and news travelled from the old city of rioting when tenements were torn from under slum dwellers and they were packed off out of sight to distant locations." (Sahgal, 1985: 23) By this, Sahgal points out the struggle between the dominant and oppressed class.

The novel also shows torturing during the emergency. The prisoners are tortured in all ways, "...upside-down hangings, rods up anuses, lighted cigarettes held to tender organs, and more, much more" (Sahgal, 1985: 183). During the Emergency, people were held under detention without trial and

their rights were suspended, "...citizens broken on the wheel for remembering their rights" (Sahgal, 1985: 227).

Like other novels, Sahgal advocates human values also in *Rich Like Us*. Putting the humanistic concern across the novel, Sahgal shows that she is the champion of individual freedom. She believes that the declaration of emergency is not an overnight action, but it is a consequence of course of actions, loss of moral values especially in politics and bureaucracy. The portrayal of Sonali is more human and less bureaucrat.

While projecting the darker side of the emergency, the novel portrays the loss of Gandhian ideals. Though Mahatma Gandhi is not at the centre of the novel as in *Kanthapura* (1973) of Raja Rao or *Waiting for the Mahatma* (1955) of R. K. Narayan, we can see his presence and influence in the novel. As a result, the novel shows the disturbing period of the seventies demonstrating the attack on democracy under the emergency. We witness her traditional faith in politics in *Rich Like Us*.

The novel provides a detailed account of the emergency exposing Indian politics. It gives a realistic picture of emergency as Mathur (1991: 68-69) said, "It is in Nayantara Sahgal's *Rich Like Us*, however, that the realities of this brief nightmarish period have been translated into human terms without any of their repulsiveness being lost. In this novel, we find an intermingling of the individual and contemporary politics and how the suffocating political environment bears down upon the lives of a few sensitive people."

Though the novel deals with the most critical period of Indian politics, it is a fine example of creativity. It is challenging for the writer to transfer the facts in fiction as Naik (1984: 130-131) pointed, "the real test of political novel is in its preservation of the integrity of its fictional values of the ensuring that politics permeates the work either in the form of ideas and ideology or in respect of setting action as genuinely non-political literature". But, very brilliantly, Sahgal mix up facts and fiction greatly in *Rich Like Us* dramatizing history. Even, it is not a novel where virtue is rewarded or that ends giving a simple solution.

### **Conclusion:**

Nayantara Sahgal's *Rich like Us* is about the world of woman-man relationships and the world of politics that presents the picture of post-independent India focusing mainly on the period of

the emergency. The novel not only provides a detailed account of the emergency but also exposes its horrifying effects. It shows the brutality of the emergency with dual narration through the characters as well as using different symbols. Though it shows strong concern for the woman's plight, it deals mainly with the elite and rich. It presents the demotion of life and the loss of values. Although the novel deals with the most critical period of Indian politics, it is a fine example of creativity. Thus, *Rich like Us* is known more for depicting the horrifying effects of the emergency.

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