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Rich like us: The political picture of India

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Abstract

Rich like us (1985) is Nayantara Sahgal's best novel. This novel won the Sinclair Prize and Sahitya Akademi Award. It presents the political picture of India between 1975-76 the time her cousin Indira Gandhi declared a state of National Emergency and assumed absolute power for about twenty months. Sahgal shows the emergency was not something that happened overnight, it was the consequence of the slow erosion of moral values, which had set in, among the civil servants and the people at large, after independence.

Keywords: Happened, emergency, erosion

Introduction

The main theme of the novel Rich Like Us is woven with the thread of political issues. This novel tells about the political events of the mid-seventies, the authoritarian pattern which was followed and the isolation it imposed. It is also about the causes which led to it. The novel opens in the post-Emergency period but travels back to more than a hundred and fifty years analysing and questioning the political relationship and value-system of the past. Veney Kirpal writes:

The Indian novelist of the 1980s began to write "histories" that would oppose the tailored, forged histories of authoritarian governments. Salman Rushdie did it in *Midnight's Children* and shame, Amitav Ghosh in *The Shadow Lines*, Shashi Tharoor in *The Great Indian Novel* and Nayantara Sahgal has done it in *Rich like us*. Each one of these novelists has attempted to write a history of her/his times through the imaginative form of fiction ^[1].

In this novel, the Emergency is a reversal of all that the past has stood for the "battles for freedom fought and won and all that sacrifice now come to this" (RLU-198). It is an act of discontinuity, abandoning all earlier norms. It is a world gone awry, where everything was not all right.

The novel opens in Dev's house, where he and his wife Nishi are entertaining a foreign guest, Neuman, a collaborator in the proposed Happyola factory. What brings them together is their concern for making money. Neuman has come to India in search of a market, and Dev is the Indian collaborator. Sahgal writes:

Neuman was a traveller on his way in or out. He had no interest in prolonging his stay, tempted only occasionally by a fragment from the past, some wondrous bit of broken stone, or a jewel of a temple, the work of stonemasons, not architects, connoisseurs' times for men with time and a different calling. His knowledge of history and archeology, once his great fascination, had fallen into disuse like other once compelling interests he had discarded because they did not contribute to the financial basis of his happiness ^[3].

Both Neuman and Dev wait for Ravi Kachru who is an important bureaucrat, part of "the conveyor belt that had delivered the cash to the Minister for Industry, relatively minor graft in terms of big investment and the returns expected from it" ^[8]. Neuman observes the Indian obsession with things imported. He feels the anonymity of Dev's house which is without the "acho of time past or things to come" ^[8]. This confinement to the present is Dev's strength and the emergency's aim. It is also perhaps the country's weakness. At one place in the novel, Rose (Dev's stepmother) thinks of Dev as a person who had

Nothing in his head except the present. There's no more to him than that. No dreams at all. Even especially- the mad have dreams. He hasn't even the saving grace of natural, harmless madness. Locked up in the present like a cell, he's a lunatic of another kind, cut off from continuity before or behind (177).

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This novel also tells the story of Sonali. Contrasted with Dev's absorption in the present is Sonali's preoccupation with the past. Sonali is an I.C.S. officer who has grown up in a world which had fostered idealism. She is the protagonist—once a student of history, now a civil servant—has just been transferred out of Delhi for having disallowed the setting up of the imported Happyola Drink factory by an applicant who had the support of the Minister of Industry. The same day, Sonali is taken very ill—the doctor diagnoses it as hepatitis but it could as well have been a psychosomatic illness caused by the grave threat to Indian democracy that the Emergency had begun to spell. However, the period of convalescence gives Sonali the time to clarify her thoughts and on recovery she resigns from her job. It is her way of asserting her value-system and recuperating her long-cherished ideals. She is unable to shift her alignments to accommodate the new requirements, and is taken by surprise by the suddenness of them all. Somehow, thought the atmosphere of fear and terror begins to envelope them, she continues to believe in the validity of her training, and one day when she rejects the application of a foreign collaborator purely on economic grounds, she finds herself posted out and demoted. It is only when the new power hits her that the process of questioning begins, a questioning which leaves her disillusioned and bewildered.

Sonali now understands what her father (a retired civil servant) had meant when, reacting to the imposition of the Emergency, he had warned her that, "History would now be revised and rewritten. All dictatorships meddled with history (199)."

The Emergency was turning out to be just such a period of dictatorship where history was beginning to get revised rapidly. Sonali sees it as akin to the forged cheques of Dev. People were afraid of defying a power they didn't know how to handle.

Indeed, one of the principal thematic thrusts of the novel seems to be Sonali's growing comprehension that the ideals on which she had been tenderly raised—that in a free India all people are equal, have fundamental human rights, and all have access to an unbiased justice system that will ensure those rights—have little basis in the reality of 1970s India. Certainly we see some insight into the privileged power structure in India when Sonali, remembering her university days with Ravi at Oxford, identifies the dominant elite as the "tiny wee handful whose uncles and aunts all know each other and who are in charge of everything without a notion of what everything really is. Understanding through personal experience the simplest subjugations of womanhood, she also resists doctrines, such as Ravi's Marxism, that require the subordination of large groups of people to the ideas of the powerful, that posit someone with the right answers to, in Ravi's words, crack a whip and lick them (the Indian people) in to shape. At one place Sonali realize that Indian nationalism has not liberated all of India's people:

It was too late for my painful shock to mitigate a fearsome tragedy, but not too late for me to wonder when the saga of peaceful change I had been serving from behind my desk had become a saga of another kind, with citizens broken on the wheel for remembering their rights. They, them, the ruling class on one side, the ruled on the other. Power had changed hands but what else had changed where he lived? If ever there was an emergency, it was this. (291-292).

Sonali does not recognise herself in the 'they, them'. She does not concede that, belonging to the class that must suspend the constitutionally guaranteed rights of non-elite others to maintain its controlling position; she is in compliance with the structures of dominance. In other words, Sonali does not ultimately unlearn her privilege.

Given her 'positive kind of national pride' and the novel's liberalism, the only alternative path Sonali might have taken would have been to adopt a leadership role during the Emergency and fight on behalf of those people, like the beggar, who have suffered as a result of the middle-class hegemony that the novel depicts. And rich Like Us does give us examples of leaders who have stepped out of obscurity in retaliation against the suffering of India's people. Indira Gandhi, although never mentioned by name but only alluded to through ironic titles like 'Madam'; is represented as a kind of anti-leader, a leader who claims to serve the needs of the masses but whose policies and decisions actually increase their hardship and diminish their liberty.

In this novel Sahgal, by telling the story of the Emergency from a perspective—Sonali constantly decanters the specious claims and opportunistic aspirations of its supporter:

We knew this was no emergency. If it had been, the priorities would have been quite different. We were all taking part in a thinly disguised masquerade, preparing the stage for family rule (23).

In setting Sonali's text against the supportive interpretations of the Emergency against the speeches of the Ministers, the populist slogans coined, the declarations of progress made, the figures of targets achieved—Sahgal resists closure and capture into the official version of history.

And how the speech of the Minister of Industry gets read against itself as a narrative of his hypocrisy, sycophancy, insincerity and distance from the people because of the opposition provided by Sahgal:

A humble follower of Gandhi was what he still remained though the journey had taken him and the country from Mahatma to Madam. He was but a speck of dust at her feet. And God and Madam willing, he would continue in the cabinet till the day he died.

But a word about the emergency so tenderly portrayed in song as he arrived. Now that it had ended bonded labour and brought other social evils come to an end a new era of opportunity and plenty awaited the weaker sections. The Minister's gaze wandered over the audience. When he looked around him, he said, he saw people much better fed and better dressed than ever before. His travels around the country confirmed this.

But let it not be forgotten that the weak and the poor, the oppressed, the repressed and the suppressed were the first concern of the government (49).

Here, Sahgal uses the technique of constant intrusion to displace the politician's narrative and to foreground her meaning of democracy. She does it in Sonali's voice. According to Sonali, democracy means the sharing of power with the people as she recalls the Hindi poet Dinkar's words, "vacate the throne for the people are coming" (197).

Although Mahatma Gandhi and Indira Gandhi are constructed as polarised opposites in Rich like us—the novel suggests that Gandhi, knowing their wants and needs, was the true leader of the poor while Indira, seeking only her own and her son's glorification, was the false one—their

actual attitudes to India's dispossessed were, in fact, comparable.

Teresa Hubel reads Nayantara Sahgal's *Rich like us*. Through her reading of the novel - which she sees as an example of liberal feminism at its best:

She demonstrates, too that while the novel consistently criticises the Emergency, it does so from what is, perhaps, a comfortable middle-class position, and gives as an example of Sonali's decision to bury herself in historical research until the Emergency is over, rather than to take on an active leadership role and fight for those like the beggar who are the victims of the middle-class hegemony that the novel depicts [2].

In fact *Rich like us*, which shows an idealistic bureaucrat up against the misrule of the Emergency days, is the most political of her novels. The earlier novels were peopled by influential politicians and the rich, but this novel features people like Kishori Lal, the petty shopkeeper, or the agricultural labourer reduced to beggary because the landlords cut off both his hands as punishment for his temerity in demanding his due wages. *Rich like us* is not confined to ephemeral politics - the novelist is interested in the historical background which has nurtured this kind of lawlessness, and the acquiescence of the elite to it. It is also a profound study of the status of women in modern India, and its links with the past. As Sahgal puts it:

It would be truer to say that what possesses me is a sense of history, rather than politics. It is that layer-upon-layer of social/religious/cultural composition that has made us what we are, and brought us to where we stand today, that interests me [3].

The novel is based on the kind of experience available to any sensitive Indian, not something exclusive to the Nehru family. The horrific mutilation of the sharecropper, or the disappearance of the village women who go to work in brick kilns, are based on incidents reported in Indian newspapers. The press had carried reports of Sanjay Gandhi's criminal activities as a young man, based on Delhi gossip about his gang of friends who would hold up petrol pumps and steal cars just for thrills, as they were not short of cash. These reports and the general Indian attitude towards a son, form the basis for Ram's tolerant attitude towards his only child's waywardness:

'My son' had to be spoken in a holy whisper. Never mind if he hijacked cars for fun, boys will be boys and they were returned to their owners in the end, weren't

they? And if he helped himself to money from the till, well, after all, it was going to be his one day. He was a fun-and-games man and companion hijacker to the highest in the land. This was no ordinary 'delinquents' club, so there was nothing for his parents to worry about (205).

From the point of view of time, the action of the novel begins after the declaration of the Emergency and doesn't take us to its end (only to the beginning of the end). Sonali is thirty eight; having been born in 1937 she is old enough to have absorbed the idealism and the hope of the pre-independence period. She has something from the past to which she can compare the present. In 1959 both Sonali and Ravi were at Oxford experiencing the freedom of youth.

Sonali signs the file and returns it exactly a month and a day after June 26, 1975. Thus dates and years are given so one can relive the period. There are references to the newspaper reports of 1822-23, to the world wars, to Raja Ram Mohan Roy, to Gandhi and to J.P. All these references are

references to movements and counter movements, to the changes which wars and reformers bring in. The journeys into the past are like successive waves each reaching further than the one before, and all the journeys are not performed by Sonali alone. Others - Rose remembers the period of courtship, the life in Lahore, Mona's silent protests, the Second World War the riots in the streets, Marcella. It stresses the point that revolutions can be of different kinds and levels, but they are happening all the time. Besides these things, this novel can be read as a feminist text too, because in *Rich like us*, Sahgal has transcended the personal introverted world of *The Day in Shadow*. Here she takes stock of woman's situation in the patriarchal society more objectively where power is monopolized by men. In this novel, the uneven division of power, between the sexes is accepted neither as natural nor inevitable.

In the present patriarchal set-up, man is not merely the master of his own life, he also creates woman's destiny for her. This novel is not only concerned with Emergency but focus on feminist issues also. With a wife and a newly born infant back home in India, Ram is still free to court Rose in England. When he realizes that he cannot use Rose as a pastime, he very deliberately and cautiously starts building an emotional labyrinth around Rose, erecting a world around her, drawing her deep into it, the door shutting, Rose inside. But once he is confident that Rose is too deep in love to ever desert him, he candidly announces that he already has a wife and a son in India. Totally insensitive to Mona's anguish, he marries in this novel. Rose is in the same house, but a marriage which Rose never thinks legal or religious. Wives for Ram are things to be used and not discarded but kept aside for future needs if any he may have. Mona is useful as the mother to his son Dev and as the manager of the household while Rose is good as a mistress-wife, always showering love and attention on Ram with not even a child of her own to claim her attention or time.

Rich like us builds around more subtle forms of persecution of women where the blood does not show even though the wounds may be much deeper. Ram's insensitivity to the suffering of both his wives is appalling. When Rose protests that she cannot continue like this with Ram living with two wives. But Ram very complacently laughs off her agony as a joke, "Lord Krishna had three hundred. I can't go on like this" (63).

To another retort, he good-humoredly replies, "Muslims can have only four at a time. We are more adventurous, even polyandrous" (63). Once he meets Marcella, he as lightly discards Rose as he had earlier discarded Mona. He does not even make any attempt at subterfuge. With absolutely no regard for Rose's feelings, he comes back home, "his footfall open and normal on the stair at three a.m." (64), and then "in the utter stillness the thin sobbing sound of pure grief no one was meant to hear" (116). More than anything else, it is their identical suffering which ultimately binds Mona and Rose together.

The situation in which Mona and Rose find themselves is in fact a creation of Ram but it means endless agony for both, where ironically they start hating each other for no fault of either. While Rose endlessly wishes for Mona's death, simultaneously realizing the wickedness of such wishes, Mona takes the drastic step of attempting suicide, constant agony at times pushes Rose to the brink of madness. Mona is dying of cancer but Ram does not have time even to listen about it. He is too busy listening to the woes of another

European woman whose husband does not pay adequate attention to her. It is a dismal world where Ram proudly passes on his legacy to Dev.

The women in this novel are certainly more aware of the injustice done to them by man, but habit makes them a willing prisoner in this world of exploitation and injustice. Love becomes a trap for Rose and, despite her suffering within marriage; she just cannot bear the idea of divorce, after getting used to living with Ram all these years. This also explains why women accept the order of life created for them by men without any protest. Mona at one stage is given a separate flat to live as an honourably retired wife and later Rose is also made to live separately for five years, without even having any explanation.

In this male world where men pass orders and women carry them out, where men create situations and woman live with them, the only hope for a woman is another woman.

This details of women's exploitation in the Indian society keep unfolding at several levels besides the experience of female protagonists. A number of male voices vehemently expose the violence done to the women who mattered so much to them, making the novel a far more intense and legitimate feminist text. For example, the words of Sonali's grandfather written in 1915 give poignant accounts of gruesome murders committed in the name of Sati, including that of his own mother. The sad realization of a grown-up son about his mother makes the plight of the woman more telling:

She was a good wife, I used to think. But now I believe all wishes are good because they have little choice. The nuns in nunneries are good. Little children in their cradles are good. The Hindu wife is a Hindu wife and can be nothing else. And it is not until we can take the goodness of women less for granted that we shall learn to value it (160-161).

The narrative is full of reminders of injustices and violence done to women in our society. Rich like us firmly rejects the arbitrary distribution of power, be it on the purely political level as it was during Emergency or on the inter-personal and familial level as in the gender roles in the society.

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