

National Consciousness in NayantaraSahgal's novel 'Rich Like Us'

Abstract: Nayantara Sahgal's novel presents a chronological account of Indian politics from the last phase of the freedom struggle to the breakdown of democracy in mid-seventies. She herself explains that politics is embedded in her "bone" and "marrow" and in her "emotional and intellectual make up" to such an extent that she can no longer remain a mere passive spectator to the happening with far reaching fall out affecting vital human interests. What is perhaps Nayantara Sahgal's singular most achievement is her perspective depiction of the political sense. She gazes at the politics of the time so minutely that even mere straws in the present air spring into view as tokens of typhoon in store. Her novel "Rich Like Us" shows her flair for pointed observation and concern for the political malaise in India, she exposes the venal nexus between politicians, bureaucrats and businessmen and holds the skull dagger of modern India.

Keywords: Indian politics, Emergency Period, Venal nexus, Politicians, Bureaucrats, Businessmen, Legacy of India

NayantaraSahgal's 'Rich Like Us' (1985) chronicles contemporary Indian culture for which the Emergency of 1976-77 provides the backdrop. The story of 'Rich Like Us' is about two victims of Emergency, Sonali and Rose. Sonali is an honest, industrious and vibrant civil servant. 'Demoted and posted to the backwoods' by her arrogant bosses. Here is the picture of an oppressive, corrupt regime where Sonali resigns from her job and Kishori Lal, the idealist, finds that a man can be imprisoned just for what he thinks. Rose is the Cockney upstart married to a Hindu businessman, representing the Indo-British experience. The novel opens in the post emergency period but harks back to more than a hundred fifty years analysing and questioning the political relationship and valve systems of the past. It also presents the picture of a generation which remembers the British Raj and Partition by blending the Hindu and the Christian cultures. The emergency is a reversal of all that the past has stood for in the 'battle of freedom fought and won and all that sacrifice has now come to this.' [Sahgal:1985:27] The emergency provides only a take off point for Sahgal's inquiry at many levels.

Western educated Sonali is the central female character here, who suffers a lot. She is a hardworking and conscientious IAS officer working as Joint Secretary in the Ministry of Industry. She is an upright officer and for that she is intimidated by men and pressurized to fall in line with senior officers and ministers. She however, retains her courage and dignity and refuses to toes the line of her bosses. Eventually, she resigns. This is the price she has to pay for her freedom. She feels disgusted to see the autocratic manner of Mrs. Gandhi's government.

"... this emergency is just what we needed and the trouble makers are in jail... the way the country is being run now, with one person giving the orders, and none 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 is going to be very good for business." [Sahgal:1985:10]

When the novel opens, we find Mr. Neuman, a businessman from abroad, seated in the drawing room of Nishi and Dev and being offered scotch by the hostess. "Five times the price of the Indian" (p.9) Mr. Neuman has come to India on business and has his oyster in the Emergency. He learns that the PM's son is in business himself- "he is making a people's car." (p.12) As a passionate believer of civil rights and liberty, the novelist excoriates the blatant measures in the name of emergency. In her opinion "this was no emergency... but preparing the stage for family rule." (p.29)

"What was wrong with a son succeeding his mother in this particular republic? And which mother anywhere in the world wouldn't move heaven and earth for her son? Madam's son had vasectomized the lower classes, blowing up tenements and scattering slum dwellers to beautify Delhi, setting up

youth camps with dropouts in command, loafers and ruffians would otherwise have been no more than loafers and ruffians.” [Sahgal:1985:p.9]

This passage is both a record of the contemporary political events and a commentary on them. It represents her views and opinions and what is more noteworthy is the form of protest she keeps alive in these lines. Delhi, the locale of the novel, is a small hearted place concentrating not on ideal but merely an ambition and thus, “the democracy of Pandit Nehru, who had been dead ten years, was in trouble.” (p.167) Nayantara Sahgal is pained to observe that “the emergency had given all kinds of new twists and turns to policy and the world’s largest democracy was looking like nothing so much as one of the two bit dictatorships we had loftily looked down upon.” (p.31) The concern for freedom and democracy is foremost in her mind.

The novel straddles the pre-independence and the post-independence scenario – “From Mahatma to Madam.” She talks about politics, civil disobedience, human rights, emergency, “the naked display of power and authority” (p.35), censorship, news blackout, picking up citizens for vasectomy. She also touches upon such problems as right to live and other social evils such as bride being burnt to death by her in-laws because her family couldn’t satisfy their demands for more dowry, criminals blinded by the police with needles dipped in acid to cure them once and for all of the crime and share croppers murdered for demanding their share of the harvest and also the Indian marriage system about which Sonali says, “I think one reason why I never married was the wedding I saw as a child.” (p.53)

The novel Nayantara Sahgal amply shows her deep concern with the need for women’s liberation, smashing patriarchal limitations. It was perhaps this concern, which prompted her to devote Chapter Eleven of this novel to presenting a ghastly account of the way widows were forced to perform Sati, “a revolting system of suicide and murder.” (p.134) Sonali reading her grandfather’s manuscript written in 1915 finds how if a widow could not bear the flames and tried to get out of the pyre her relatives would thrust her back into the fire and beat with logs of wood so that she fell unconscious and did not try to run out of the fire again. Sonali’s great grandfather who was a crusader against Sati was very happy when in 1829 the horrid rule of Sati was abolished. Mrs. Sahgal observes,

“If a custom so atrocious were to be stopped in every part of British India, as well as the states ruled by the princes, is one of which we then lived, it must be ruthlessly perpetrated and publicly punished. Those who perpetrated it must be hanged in the market place or it would go on into the next century.” (p.132)

Sahgal closely questions this dominant gender ideology and waves her feminist stance which endorses “a humanistic modernity in place of the oppressions of tradition.” Her passion for reform makes her critical of Hinduism in its present form. It needs reform. She observes:

“The Hindu reformation was right named. It was an organized movement, a united endeavour, an awakening in the true sense. Mighty echoes of it are still with us in the remembered eloquences of the young monk. Vivekananda, the Swami who thundered against the abuses of Hinduism from Kashmir to Cape Comorin and across the seas, saying it has become a religion of cooking pots.” (p.133)

She goes on to say that if Raja Ram Mohan Roy had left the Hindu fold and embraced Christianity as had once seemed likely a Christian wave would have swept the country instead of a Hindu Reformation (p.133) No doubt she points out certain merits of Hinduism as a religion of “... immense antiquity with no traceable beginning, without a founder, a prophet or a church, with no single bible or commandments, no judgement day, no heaven and no hell, and therefore no conceivable way to pack it up and dispense with it. Hinduism is not taught, nor does it seek converts. It simply is.” (p.133)

The novelist valiantly strives for freedom from an orthodox, out dated view of Hinduism which is responsible for a great deal that is happening in the present Indian Society, it is answerable for both the apathy and the violence in it and for a great deal more. The hold of orthodox religion had undermined secularism and she relates the political ills the nation is afflicted with to a lopsided interpretation of Hinduism.

In the present novel NayantaraSahgal mentions that at a time of partition there was an uproar about religion and the streets were full of shouts “Hindu Muslim ek ho.” (p.72) Rose could not understand all the commotion about religion these days and why the communities should be told to be one when she finds Ram, her husband and Zafar, his friend, to be on already.

Rose says, “You could not put a grain of rice between them, they were that alike. Ram was a muslimized Hindu, Zafar was a Hinduized Muslim. So what was all the shouting about?” (p.72)

Rose fails to understand the difference of religion. The novelist does not believe in a fragmented society and therefore as an embodiment of love and compassion, Rose, with her Christian religion, seems to be representing the broad and all-embracing vision of the authoress.

While presenting the picture of a decadent society, NayantaraSahgal’s penchant for Gandhian ideology is well discernible here. If she has to choose between Marx and Gandhi, her preference goes for Gandhi. She questions the culture superiority of the West. In her opinion the first trade union in the textile industry had been the work of “Mahatma Gandhi and he had kept throwing a spanner in the works of the proletarian uprising by just being around.” (p.111) Sahgal simply marvels at the beauty of the two words, “Daridranarayan” and “Harijan” and of their power to inspire “words that had existed in no Indian language.” This was the language of a new epic, invented by Gandhi. The man had used his brain and what we needed now was a like inventiveness to suit our own conditions.” (p.113) This takes us inevitably to the conclusion that Mrs. Sahgal is a great humanist in her heart of hearts.

NayantaraSahgal’s novel presents even more obviously a chronological account of Indian politics from the last phase of the freedom struggle to the breakdown of democracy in mid-seventies. She herself explains that politics is embedded in her “bone” and “marrow” and in her “emotional and intellectual make up” to such an extent that she can no longer remain a mere passive spectator to the happening with far reaching fall out affecting vital human interests. What is perhaps Nayantara Sahgal’s singular most achievement is her perspective depiction of the political sense. She gazes at the politics of the time so minutely that even mere straws in the present air spring into view as tokens of typhoon in store. “It is a tribute to her as a political novelist that she could sense and show the danger in the new trend... years before the country had actually experienced the culmination of such a trend.” [Sharma: 1995: 1-15]

Her novel “Rich Like Us” shows her flair for pointed observation and concern for the political malaise in India, she exposes the venal nexus between politicians, bureaucrats and businessmen and holds the skull dagger of modern India. Sahgal’s ironical look at the new rich and pampered section of society is built into the very title of the novel. But here focus also falls on the rich cultural legacy of India, which has stood the test of time.

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