



POLITICAL ELEMENTS IN THE NAYANTARA SAHGAL'S RICH LIKE US

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ABSTRACT

Sahgal's novels thus not only constitute an impressive segment of the Indian English novel but also sum up the saga of India's struggle for freedom and the changes it has brought about in the traditional social set-up in India. Sahgal is unique in her artistic sensibility as well as in her particular manner of projecting national consciousness. All the novelists write in their own way and style. They reveal their thoughts, experiences and sharp vision in day-to-day life of the people in their novels as per their own convictions. Nayantara Sahgal has also constructed her views in her novels. Sahgal's novels present an authentic picture of India before and after independence. She considers her novels political in content and intention and in her view; each of the novels more or less reflects the political era we were passing through. The use of political genre is one of the main aspects of her novels, the others being the exploration of the religious theme and the problems of women in contemporary society. Though Sahgal has been hailed chiefly as a political novelist, her feminist concern is obvious and her fighter spirit quite vocal in her fiction. In all her works, there is a juxtaposition of two worlds: the personal world of man-woman relationship and the impersonal world of politics.

Key Words- Political, Politics, Nayantara Sahgal.

Introduction-

Nayantara Sahgal is one of the distinguished Indo-English writers who write in the stream of national consciousness. The first generation of important women writers began publishing their work in the 1950s. Kamala Markandaya, Ruth Praver Jhabvala, Santha Rama Rau were all active on the literary scene. During this period, Nayantara Sahgal emerged as one of the most significant voices in the realm of Indian English fiction. Nayantara Sahgal was born in Allahabad on May 10, 1927 into one of India's most prominent political families. With her mother Vijayalakshmi Pandit as India's first ambassador to the U. N., her uncle Jawaharlal Nehru as India's first Prime Minister, and her first cousin, Indira Gandhi as India's third



Prime Minister as well as the first woman Prime Minister of India; it is not surprising that politics and history inspire and underlie much of her writing. She is a prolific writer. She has to her credit nine novels, two biographies, two political commentaries and a large number of articles, contributions to various newspapers and magazines. Sahgal is a novelist and political commentator who have published nine novels and seven works of non-fiction. *Rich Like Us* won the Sinclair Fiction Prize and the Sahitya Akademi Award.

Political issues in the Rich Like Us-

Sahgal's novel, *Rich Like Us*, presents a picture of India after Independence but shows primarily the state of affairs in the country under the Emergency imposed by her cousin, Indira Gandhi. The novel is set in the period when the Emergency was just one month old. The novel is many individual histories, and many voices in one a vivid and compelling tapestry of India's past and present. *Rich Like Us* is a fearlessly presented account of the harassment caused to all sections of people during the period of National Emergency. It deals with the impingement of politics on the personal lives of people and studies the impact of Emergency on a vast panorama of characters. Here is a successful attempt to record history through the totality of its immediate effect on those who participate in it. The novel runs on the oddly parallel life tracks of two very different women. A time promising wealth for the corrupt, but terrifying with sterilization for the poor and jail for the critical, the Emergency changes forever the lives of both women. Sahgal's concern with the political themes and issues of current importance has been readily recognised. We may say that politics is inextricably interwoven in the novels of Nayantara Sahgal. In "Passion for India".

Nayantara Sahgal is acclaimed as the only political novelist, at least among women writers. As A. V. Krishna Rao observes, "Nayantara Sahgal is perhaps one of our best socio-political novelists today."¹ She confines her novels to the affluent society involved in politics. Her main contribution thematically has been her deep involvement and concern with politics. However, her absorbing concern with politics is not divorced from humanistic concern. Her characters, though very much involved in political situations are very human. Their personal predicaments, sometimes, run parallel to the political crises they face. Sahgal is a champion of individual freedom which is reflected profusely in her novels. Her novels portray the various social and cultural changes that take place in India and the individual's response to them. Her familiarity with the society which she portrays in her novels lends them authenticity. In spite of her sound understanding of woman's plight and concern for the dilemma of the new woman, she is restricted by the very political background of hers that lent authenticity to her novels, and deals with the predicament of only the elite and the affluent.

Sahgal has first-hand knowledge of politics and political figures in India, for she spent most of her childhood in Anand Bhawan, the ancestral home of the Nehru's in Allahabad. It is



beyond doubt that politics is in her blood. Jawaharlal Nehru was her mother's brother, while her father died because of an illness he suffered in prison when he was jailed for participating in India's freedom struggle. The important political events form the background for each of her novels. Sahgal's writing is famous for keeping in touch with the latest political ups and downs with a tinge of Western liberalism. Her novels truthfully mirror the contemporary Indian political theme. Her attitude in the novels is tantamount to that of Nehru that is co-mingled with the Western outlook. Unlike the other political writers, she never professes any specific political ideology or favouring any political creed or political movement. All her major characters of the novel are centripetally drawn towards the vortex of politics. Sahgal's novels weave aspects of India's social, political, and cultural history into their narrative framework and subject them to a close critical examination.

The period covered is roughly between the 1930s, when there was a mass awakening in the country to rise and revolt against the British empire, and the time of emergency in 1975. Her novels make covert and some rare overt references to significant political happenings, especially the novels she wrote during 1970s and 1980s; critics have also considered her a political novelist or a novelist with political consciousness. She deals with issues related to historical reconstructions more self-consciously. In her earlier novels too she combines personal and public history by intertwining the past of individual lives with India's historical past. She has been the turmoil both before and after the independence in 1947. Sahgal writes in her autobiography *Prison and Chocolate Cake*.

Rich Like Us is the coveted Sahitya Akademi award and Sinclair Prize winning work of Nayantara Sahgal. It is probably her best novel in which the action dates back to the period of India's National Emergency during 1974-75 when the Parliament was in a state of suspended animation. The novel presents a picture of India after Independence but shows primarily the state of affairs in the country under the Emergency imposed by her cousin Indira Gandhi. Sahgal's searching look at India during the Emergency reveals that democracy and spirituality are only skin-deep. She delineates the socio-political scenario of India particularly during Emergency, the backdrop of which is Delhi. The novel projects the failures, frustrations and exploitation of woman a faithful wife, a middle aged unmarried civil servant or a cockney English woman. There is a remarkable blend of the two worlds here, the public and the private.

The novel is a fearlessly presented account of the harassment caused to all sections of people during the period of National Emergency. Besides depicting the anguish during Emergency, the novelist takes the reader to the scenario of the Second World War and nostalgic prepetition days and describes the magnetic, transforming influence of Gandhi on the masses. The novelist weaves a narrative around a number of characters: Ramlal Surya; his English wife, Rose; his Indian wife, Mona; Sonali Ranade, the I. A. S. Officer, the narrator; Dev; Ramlal's son Ravi Kachru and Kishori Lal are the principal characters while the Prime



Minister and her staff are in the background. Beginning with an ironic title with multiple meanings, the flow of action in the novel constantly fluctuates between the past and the present through two consciousnesses, one of Rose and the other of Sonali. Both Sonali and Rose are typical Sahgal women. Here, Sahgal introduces three major female characters. Each one of them is different in her outlook and background.

Sahgal traces the impact of the Emergency on a large number of characters, simultaneously highlighting the responses of these individuals to the social tension created by the Emergency. Among the many victims are Sonali, a conscientious Civil Servant; Rose, a cockney shop-girl turned an Indian businessman's foreign wife who tries her best to make a passage to India and at last meets her death in the hands of a 'youth camp tough' employed by her step son, Dev, one of the small tyrants the Emergency has created; Kishori Lal, a petty merchant, arrested and harassed by the police for being associated with the RSS; a youth from the Nehru University severely manhandled and imprisoned for being a member of the Marxist Party; and Ravi Kachru, a shrewd administrator who manages to ride the tide of popularity in the early days of the Emergency. These are the representative of the common predicament shared by the majority in the period of National Emergency. Rose's life is changed after she meets Ram. When Ram first meets Rose, she is a twenty-year old lower-class cockney English girl. She is the daughter of a factory worker. Her life before Ram had not prepared her for a life-time of commitment to someone like Ram, far less to his life-style. Rose had broken her settled engagement with Freddie in order to marry Ram, a Lahore based businessman. Though she knew all about Ram's first marriage and a son of him, she married him for love. She believes in the ideal of love. There was something romantic about her attitude to Ram: She had entered an emotional labyrinth and she was drawn magnetically on, with Ram doing no more than holding her hand for the entire two weeks before he asked her, a victim of casual unthinking sorcery, to marry him. And it was a sign of the distance she had travelled. Rose has undergone silent suffering with an undeclared war around her in Ram's house and the bonds of blood and flesh and the laws of the Hindu Undivided Family coming in the way of her freedom and privacy. She realizes that "without a child of her own she would never be the mistress of the house not evens her half of it." The cold war between Rose and Mona reconciled only after Mona's attempt to commit suicide. Once again, Rose finds herself the unwanted third in a love-triangle when Ram falls in love with Marcella. In all her troubles, Sonali remains her friend and fights for her right to property. And finally, she is murdered. But people are made to believe that she invited the death on herself. Mona, Ramlal's first wife comes from a typical conservative traditional Punjabi family. She takes refuge in, and draws strength from prayers, 'bhajans' and 'Kirtans'.

She leads a conventional life. In fact, Rose in those early years at Lahore had never seen her, even though they lived in the same house. She is secure in her status as the lady of the house. She instructs the servants in the daily running of the house, sometimes only to assert her role. Mona has unshakeable faith in astrology. Her marriage with Ram had been arranged with the

help of astrologers and horoscopes. But all this had not prevented Ram from taking another wife. Even then, Mona continued to be ruled by the predictions of astrologers. When she focuses all her attentions on Dev, her son, all dreams and hopes for her son's future are once again ruled by the planets. Earlier Mona was suffering because of Ram's love for Rose and then Rose also suffers in the same manner because of Ram's love for Marcella. Ram enjoys life fully with both the wives, with Mona looking after the household affairs and the child, and Rose providing sensual pleasure and a company in business. Both the women feel wronged, lonely and insecure. Sahgal strongly condemns the attitudes which reduce women to an object. In her study of Sahgal and Doris Lessing, Neena Arora observes:

Man considers it as normal male behaviour to satisfy his desires at both the emotional and the physical level outside marriage while at the slightest hint of any deviation on her part which may not involve sex, man turns violent and hostile towards his wife and starts persecuting her."

Sonali is a thirty-eight year old I. C. S. officer who as a narrator, is far from being a passive observer. During the Emergency, her strong opinions on democracy cost her job, an event she accepts as symptomatic of changing times. In Sonali, we find a woman whose life is deeply affected by the various twists and turns that the Indian body politics takes. We see Sonali falling in love with Ravi Kachru soon after independence. The novelist focuses on Sonali Ranade, an I.A.S. officer and joint secretary in the Union Ministry of Industry. The three characters -Sonali, Kishori Lal and Dev are act as the centre of consciousness.

There is inter-action among each of these three characters and the events which brings out the inner tension between diverse points of view and raises a number of socio-political, moral, ethical and human questions. She gets demoted and transferred to U.P. because of her honest adherence to the Governments declared industrial policy in rejecting a multinational company's application for a licence to produce a fizzy drink called Happyola. She is replaced by her former class-fellow and present colleague, Ravi Kachru. She resigns from the service rather than be cowed down by a hypocritical government. She recalls her past days when fifteen years back she had topped the list in the competitive examination for the civil service. On this achievement, her father had tears in his eyes with the hope that her new responsibility could bring a peaceful historical change.

Though the fires and fevers of Sonali were different from her father, it touched both of them with its magic. Her memories of it had been her inheritance. The distinction between politics and the service had become badly blurred over the last few years; the two sides were hopelessly mixed, with politicians meddling in administration, and favourite like Kachru, the

prime example, playing politics as if his life depended on it. suddenly he was indispensable here, there and everywhere, the right hand and left leg of the Prime Minister and her household. The action of the novel begins after the declaration of the Emergency and does not take us to its end, Sonali is thirty-eight and 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. Sonali, as an honest and out spoken person, finds that the reasons given by the government for the imposition of emergency were not true.

The novel deals with the changes brought about by the emergency bring in the social and political fabric of the country by analysing the response it evokes among individuals, classes and groups. Here Sahgal provides for two narratives, the main narrative and the shorter narrative of Sonali. The novelist vividly dramatizes the historical scene and comments elaborately on some of the crucial issues thrown up by the times. The novelist shows primarily the state of affairs in the country under the Emergency imposed by her cousin, Indira Gandhi. Her own abhorrence of the Emergency got expression in resigning her membership of the Sahitya Akademi's Advisory Board for English. Her description of the Emergency shows how tyrants of all hues were created by that one act of Indira Gandhi and how they operated with impunity. Sahgal has special regard for patriots like Mahatma Gandhi and Pandit Jawaharlal Lal Nehru. Some passages in the novel reveal her true respect for Pandit Nehru. What a man, what character, what integrity, what ability, what democracy. What refinement such as never-before seen. Relationships, anecdotes, encounters with Panditji popped up like jack-in the boxes.

The novel delineates different incidents such as the murder of the narrator Sonali's great grandmother in the name of suttee, the mutilation of the sharecropper because he asks for his due, the rape of the village women by the police because their men folk dare to resist the landlord, and the murder of Rose, the large-hearted Englishwoman in New Delhi just because her frank talk is an embarrassment to her stepson Dev, are all described in an entirely credible manner. The narrative technique is interesting; the narrator is Sonali, but alternate chapters deal with her father Keshav's friend Ram, a businessman who loves Rose and then Marcella even though he has a wife named Mona. The novel ends on a note of hope that in the midst of sycophancy, there are persons like Kishori Lal, a petty shopkeeper, who have the courage to protest against tyranny.

Conclusion-

Sahgal has first-hand knowledge of politics and political figures in India, for she spent most of her childhood in Anand Bhawan, the ancestral home of the Nehru's in Allahabad. It is beyond doubt that politics is in her blood. The important political events form the background for each of her novels. Her writing is famous for focusing on the latest political ups and



downs with a tinge of Western liberalism. Her novels truthfully mirror the contemporary Indian political theme. Sahgal's novels portray the various social and cultural changes that take place in India and the individual's response to them. Her novels deal with India's social, political and cultural history into their narrative framework and subject them to a close critical examination. Sahgal's forte is the political novel and she has given us several astute descriptions of the partition era. She has offered her interpretations of history at the same time that she has trained her eye upon sociological details.

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