

CASTEISM AND COLONIALISM IN NAYANTARA SAHGALS' NOVEL 'RICH LIKE US'

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Abstract: Caste has been considered by anthropologists and social historians as the most important mode of social stratification and oppression in India. India's caste system is often seen as an institution deeply rooted in traditional Indian culture. Before the British arrived, Dirks writes, Indian society was exceedingly fragmented into communal groupings that served as centers for social identity. In trying to make sense of these groupings, the Portuguese first suggested caste identities and the British expanded on that idea to promote order in Indian society. At 90, Nayantara Sahgal stands tall among writers in India for her courage of conviction and belief in the secular spirit of the nation enshrined by the leaders who brought it into being. Her fiction 'Rich like Us' talks about with India's elite responding to the crises engendered by political change. The novel is dedicated to the "Indo- British experience and what its sharers have learned from each other" (Rich Like Us, 3). The historical perspective is that the European traders first reached Indian shores in search of the lucrative spice trade. Later on the Dutch and the English also set up their factories in India. In 1835, English was made the medium of instruction in India's schools. British people sought to get rid of exploitation and corruption of caste system, child marriages, and the sati system. Western-educated Indian elite was also against these issues.

Keywords: Nayantara Sahgal, Rich like Us, Casteism, Colonialism, Indo-British

INTRODUCTION

Nayantara Sahgal has the distinction of being the first Indian woman novelist in English to deal with political themes. Her novels are set against the socio-political backdrop of the country and they attempt to capture the essence of the new political creed in the context of the passing of Gandhism and the disappearance of the ideological impulsions governing Nehruism. As the daughter of Ranjit Sitaram Pandit, a well-known freedom fighter of Independence Movement and Vijayalakshmi Pandit, the niece of Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, politics is Nayantara Sahgal's background and environment. Thus, she seeks to examine the misuse of power in the post-independence India in her **Rich Like Us**.

Rich Like Us is considered one of the most ambitious and complex novels of Nayantara Sahgal. It represents a situation in which, even after independence, a democratic leader usurps full power and almost begins to view with the earlier colonial rulers in repression and economic exploitation. An emergency was declared in India on 26th June 1975 and it lasted until March 1977. The novel deals with the story of India of Mrs. Gahdhi's Emergency, when power becomes arbitrary once more when the corrupt and the opportunists flourish. It is also a story of an older India, of a generation who remember the British Raj and Partition, of the continuities and the ties of family, caste, and religion.

A vivid account of the harassment, cruelty, and injustice caused to people during the Emergency is powerfully portrayed in the novel. It deals with the effect of politics on the personal lives of people and studies the impact of Emergency on various characters. The action of this novel dates back to the period of India's National Emergency during 1975 to 1977, when the parliament and constitution were in a state of suspended animation.

The novel opens in the post-Emergency period but travels back to more than a hundred and fifty years analyzing and questioning the political relationship and value systems of the past. On the face of it, 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. It is an act of discontinuity, abandoning all earlier norms. It is a world has gone awry, where "everything was not all right". (22)

The novelist clarifies that the clamping of Emergency is not a sudden development that took place overnight. It is the result of an erosion of moral values that set in among the politicians, civil servants and people at large after Independence. Apart from the impact of Emergency on the country which is the main concern of the novel, Sahgal, incidentally deals with various periods in the country's history—Sati, the freedom struggle, Gandhiji's emancipator effort and the communal frenzy associated with it and the gradual deterioration of moral values.

The novelist evokes a very impressive picture of an oppressed and corrupt regime. She exposes the corrupt hypocritical bureaucracy which created terror in the innocent people and snatched away their freedom of expression. The innocent people were imprisoned and the guiltily went unpunished though their crimes were detected because they knew people at the top.

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Caste has been considered by anthropologists and social historians as the most important mode of social stratification and oppression in India. The evils of caste system do not feature as a major theme in Sahgal's novels, yet there are instances which deal elaborately with the poor and the untouchables. Kishori Lal in *Rich Like Us*, though a great scholar, had set up a shop of bathroom accessories. When his Brahmin professor friend asked him why he had started such a business, Kishori Lal told him he was fulfilling Gandhiji's commandment:

"Carry your own excreta and no nonsense about it The Mahatma had made them carry their own shit . . . and those who had carried other people's stink for generations and been pariahs got new names and became God's children" (*Rich* 218).

Kishori Lal was a true Gandhian. Sahgal also mentions about the 'chi-chi-chi' women who had to wash the menstrual rags of the upper caste women. Such practices clearly hint that Hinduism needed antidotes to clear away many unhealthy practices.

In addition, Sahgal also tells about the rape and killing of lower caste/class women. In *Rich Like Us*, Sahgal mentions the names of several cities and towns where women are fed to brick kilns after they have been abused. As they belonged to the lower caste, they were afraid to even to complain to the police for they would receive no justice.

Sahgal belonging to the Kashmiri Brahmin Caste doesn't hesitate to criticize the pride and superiority complex these people feel in her novels. Sahgal is honest in admitting the privileged position of the Brahmins, but at the same time, she represents caste identities as a wrong basis to judge suitability for leadership.

Equality was something which the upper castes couldn't tolerate easily as it challenged the religious-cultural practice which kept them at the center and the "other" (lower castes) in the fringes of the society. Sahgal, though she belongs to the upper caste, feels civilized behavior is essential in all human dealings.

The young female Indian civil servant struggles to discover the truth and logic in her ever-changing homeland, India. Like Sonali, there were many women who had shown resistance to stay in patriarchal society. It depicts the destiny of two upper-class women; Rose is a British immigrant and wife of a powerful native businessman Ram. Sonali is a highly educated young civil servant. Rose struggles to locate a sense of home in this foreign society which was filled with prehistoric customs like Sati, casteism. Through Rose and Sonali, Sahgal presents two narrative characters side by side. **"They present a large reality than a confined narrative can contain the number of issues and she raises embrace a living society."** (Pier Paolo Piciucco, 132)

The social custom of "sati" was a religious practice and hence even the British were hesitant to interfere in it, though laws were constituted against the barbaric act. In *Rich Like Us*, Sonali's great grandfather's conversation with his English friend Mr. Timmons goes thus: **The Government has to be careful where religious sentiments are touched. Any foreign government would have to be in a populace of this size. Did the Moghuls interfere with Sati?**

They were not on a civilizing mission as you say you are. Yet they did, even so, try to interfere and they didn't have the advantage you do, in a public opinion ripe for reform. (152)

Sonali in *Rich Like Us* explains why people in India accepted such a repressive regime. "We are blind from birth, born of parents blind from birth. We do not see what we do not want to and when we cannot avoid a nasty sight it still can't do much to hurt us" (24). Sonali believes that it was her Hindu upbringing which had given her this insularity. Sahgal reveals her protagonist fighting valiantly against repressive political forces, inspired by their action-oriented creed. Sonali in *Rich Like Us* is one such fighter with more self-awareness and self-assurance. Sonali has a system of ideas which are severely shaken by the events of 1976. Sonali growing under the

impact of her Gandhian father felt Gandhiji “had taken human rights a hundred years ahead in two decades without a glimmer of class war” (*Rich* 125).

However, there were many nationalist leaders in India who wanted to bring a change in women’s condition and abolish the cruel practice of Sati. Critics have pointed out that even though the reform of women’s situation seems to be major concerns within nationalist and colonialist discourses, women themselves do not appear in these discussions about them; we learn little about how they felt or responded on the crucial issue of sati. Sahgal in *Rich Like Us* makes use of some editorials and letters written to the editors of newspapers as a form of historical evidence to prove the steps taken by the colonial masters to abolish Sati.

One of them is an editorial of the *Calcutta Gazette* of the 7th December 1829 which expresses supreme delight and celebrates the Act of Abolition of the cruel rite of suttee passed by Lord William Cavendish Bentinck. The British administrator is highly praised for his transformation.

CONCLUSION

Sahgal gives a message to the younger generation to fight a tough battle against the politicians who were disintegrating the nation under several social, religious and cultural issues. However, Sahgal regrets the stark reality that in India people have yet to learn to shed fear. The spirit of dedication and fearlessness was replaced by hypocrisy, sham, cowardice, and corruption and under Indira Gandhi’s autocratic regime of emergency, men became cowards.

She has tried to interpret Indian’s past history and culture in her novel. She has drawn a graphic picture of the colonial past of India. Its main historical events related to the rule of two hundred years of the British in India and making them a slave. She depicts the political and economic exploitation of Indians by the colonial ruler. Her novels can be called political-historical in this respect. Historians interpret the past because every generation finds new reasons for reviewing its past. History is important because it defines our culture. It has been more than sixty years since Britishers went away, but the distance in time and space has not dwindled Nayantara’s views and ways of speaking and narrating things politically.

Sahgal has reconstructed the history of the world and India. She finds many valuable common features in the different parts of the world such as the oppressed people fighting for their country’s freedom. She depicts the Indian national struggle, its goals, sacrifices made by the people. It is essential for all of us to review and explore the history to discover these very significant events, personas, sacrifices made by several brave Indians. All the past is not beautiful; some ugly aspects are there which need to be recognized and redressed.

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