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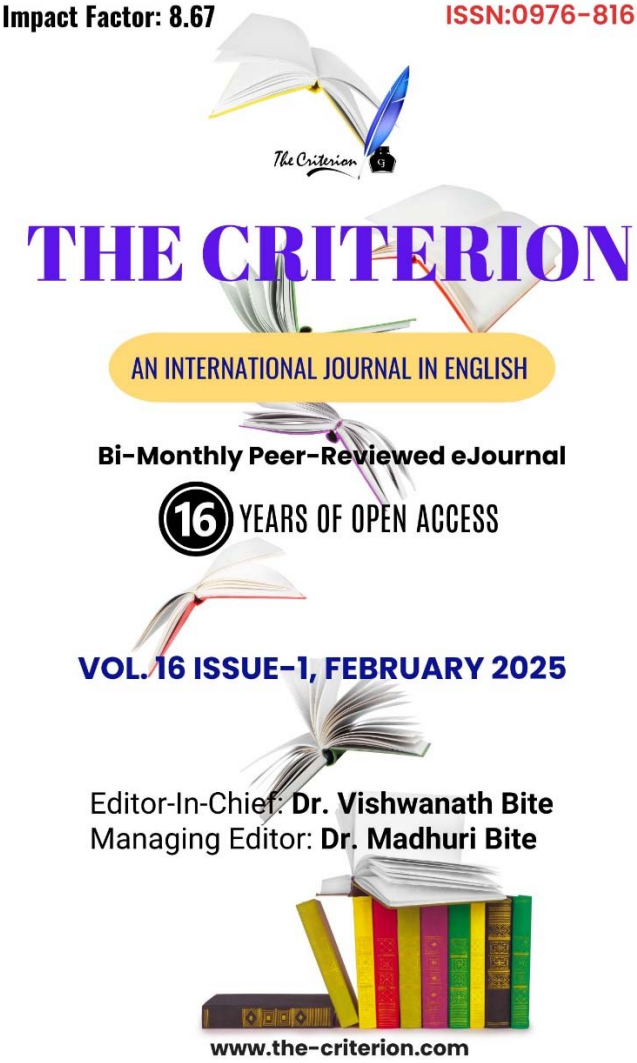

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Exploring Female Identity in Nayantara Sahgal's *Rich Like Us*

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Abstract:

The field of literature presents us with diverse perspectives on the theme of 'female identity' as expressed by both male and female writers. Throughout history and across different cultures, the role of women in society has transformed significantly, with one constant fact that women have always been looked down upon as being inferior to men. However, the female literary tradition in India has challenged patriarchal norms and given new meaning to women's self-assertion and identity. Indian female writers such as Ruth Prawer Jhabwala, Kamala Markandaya, Nayantara Sahgal, Shashi Deshpande, Anita Desai and others actively champion the cause of 'female identity'. The paper draws upon the subtle nuances of identity that Nayantara Sahgal assigns to her female characters in her political novel *Rich Like Us*. There is a distinct cleavage between two types of women; one who strives and aspires for freedom and ultimately achieves it and the second who pivots around the axis of tradition and modernity and finally finds solace into one. Sahgal breathes power into her heroines to resist and cultivates faith in modernity despite complying with their traditional roles and eccentricity.

Keywords: Female Identity, Female Writers, Patriarchy, Tradition, Modernity, Self-assertion.

Identity is a complex and dynamic construct, characterized by a malleable and constantly altering tapestry interwoven with the fabric of our experiences, relationships, and choices. It has become a key notion for the contemporary culture and literary school of criticism. The etymological meaning of the term 'identity' is 'the same' from the Latin *idem* (neuter). However, it is paradoxical as it incorporates the idea of 'distinctiveness,' even proliferates in the context of women, often bemuses with its twin term 'self'. Modern Identity theory is framed by Erik Erikson whose dominant concepts are extensively cited and validated. Judith Kegan Gardiner in "On Female Identity and Writing by Women" (1981) opines that his theory does not "apply specifically to women; there is no separate female identity theory" (349). Carolyn Heilbrun in her *Reinventing Womanhood* (1979) explicates contemporary confusions about female identity and literature. She accents the failure of a woman who is 'male-identified' as she is supposed to "take her identity from her man" (40-46). A woman does not possess a self and, hence never undergoes an identity crisis, yet she loses an identity: "The price of womanhood is abandonment of self" (178). The issue of female identity is subdued by the patriarchy as she must reconcile to the codes, norms, and expectations of femininity as nurturer, pure, tender, and more, thereby forsaking her 'self'- as aptly accentuated by Simone de Beauvoir in her seminal text *The Second Sex* (1949) that "One is not born, but rather becomes a woman" (245). Much prior, Mary Wollstonecraft's influential work, *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792), urged women to live as autonomous and rational individuals, rather than mere appendages of men. She passionately called upon women to broaden their intellectual pursuits and liberate themselves from the oppressive and limiting societal expectations imposed upon them. She asserts, "Taught from their infancy that beauty is woman's sceptre, the mind shapes itself to the body, and roaming round its gilt cage, only seeks

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to adore its prison" (82). Later, Simone de Beauvoir (1949) identifies men and women as equals in all domains and challenges the patriarchal paradigm that "the world is masculine on the whole; those who fashioned it/ ruled it and still dominate it today are men" (298). Another persistent endeavour in this direction is undertaken by Betty Friedan in *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) who accuses society of debarring women, through their rigid patriarchal system, of any sovereign identity and autonomy and abating women to the ideal of being mere sex-object, mother, housewife, or a mistress- "there was a strange discrepancy between the reality of our lives as women and the image to which we were trying to conform, the image that I came to call the feminine mystique" (9). Another exponent of the women's autonomous identity is Kate Millet in her *Sexual Politics* (1969), vehemently protested women's inferior status: "Sex was held a status category which had political implications, whereby one group of persons (male) dominate over the other" (348, brackets mine). Germaine Greer in *The Female Eunuch* (1970) apprises women that "to be emancipated from the helplessness and need to walk freely upon the earth is your birth right," denouncing marriage as the root cause of woman's helplessness and oppression (53). In the three phases of writing- Feminine, Feminist, and Female- as highlighted by Elaine Showalter in "Towards a Feminist Poetics" (1979), the final phase that denounces both imitation (first phase) and protest (second phase) strikes a chord to the importance of self-discovery and journey into identity building. Forces of society, be it cultural, moral, traditional, patriarchal, economic, and more, walk close-by women, serving as a yardstick to measure their endeavour, commitment, and success in attaining their self-identity and discovering their true selves.

Notably, while males are often identified by their abrasive masculine traits such as assertiveness, rationality, belligerence, and leadership qualities, females are often labelled with altruistic identities such as being weak, passive, docile, nurturer, tender, modest, and empathic, thereby perpetuating societal stereotypes. It has been anticipated that a woman must internalise

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the 'ideology,' 'paradigm,' 'codes,' 'generic roles,' and more, propagated by patriarchal society. Interestingly, gender and sexuality, which are socio-culturally constructed phenomena, rather than biology, which is the Law of Nature, are to be blamed for the fixation of such traits. Joan Kelly in *Women, History and Theory* (1984) says, "A woman's place is not a separate sphere of existence but a position within societal existence generally" (57). In other words, a man is construed as the 'self' and the free being independent of penetrating one's existence, whereas a woman is perceived as the 'other' depending on the superior others to get acknowledgment of her restricted existence. Human or humanity has lost its essence as being an existential, moral imperative, and genderless generic. However, women writers tend to provide a platform for women to discover their inner space and consciousness, something which is forbidden or considered taboo in the past. Literature mirrors society, they say, and hence, the historicity of literature bears testimony to the fact that female identity is fabricated through social roles and responsibilities. Therefore, the inner and outer self of a female as nurturer, dependent, and empathetic being, corresponding to her mother, is perceived as 'natural.' As Neena Arora in *Nayantara Sahgal and Doris Lessing: A Feminist Study in Comparison* (1991) opines "… the place of women in society has differed from culture to culture and from age to age, yet one fact common to almost all societies is that woman has never been considered the equal of man" (8). This fact replicates mistreatment of women and their frustration in restrained and regimented lives. Interestingly, as Herbert Spencer in his *The Principles of Sociology* (1896) conceptualised society as "social organism" that has evolved from a simpler state to a more complex one, based on the universal law of evolution, similarly, the argument of change as the rule of society validates the unconventional writing of women about 'female identity', 'female experience' and 'female self'. Self-assertion and identity of women find new meaning at the hands of female writers who rebut patriarchal norms. Indian

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female writers like Ruth Prawer Jhabwala, Kamala Markandaya, Nayantara Sahgal, Anita Desai and others, writing in English, distinctly advocate the cause of 'female identity.'

A female author's creation of a female heroine is analogous either to the creation of 'other' which is separated from the self or to the author's tendency of self-identification in the portrayal of her character. The present study attempts to navigate Nayantara Sahgal's indulgence into testing and defining multiple aspects of female identity selected from multiple imaginative possibilities. It is claimed that she has used her text as a source that will enlighten the readers about a persistent process involving the author's self-identification or emphatic engagement with her character(s) along with a glimpse of Indian culture and mythology, conflict between tradition and modernity, Hinduism, and her proclivity for Gandhian doctrine. The paper draws upon the subtle nuances of female identity that Nayantara Sahgal highlights through the very act of characterisation of females in her political novel *Rich Like Us* (1985). The author executes peculiarity while creating her female protagonist; as she clarifies in an interview with S. Varalakshmi and the latter quotes in *Indian Women Novelists* (1993):

> I try to create the virtuous woman - the modern Sita, if you like. My women are strivers and aspirers towards freedom, towards goodness, towards a compassionate world. Their virtue is a quality of heart and mind and spirit, a kind of untouched innocence and integrity. I think there is this quality in the Indian women. (57)

In the novel, there is a distinct cleavage between two types of women; one who strives and aspires towards freedom and ultimately achieves it and the second who pivots around the axis of tradition and modernity and finally finds solace into one.

Indian culture normalises the division of sexes. The way religious texts set masculine and feminine codes of behaviour strictly apart from each other; which cannot be questioned by any authority and hence one's liberation from these manacles of prejudices is quite complex as

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it is deeply ingrained in the Indian ethos. What makes the intrinsic part of Indian cultural legacy, often celebrated in mythologies, are female martyrdom, gallant womanhood, and selflessness. In Indian culture women are assigned a distinct religion and caste i.e., the *stridharma* and the *strijati*, as they are perceived to be the product of virtuous Indian mythological characters like Sita and Savitri. However, on a positive note, one woman (although a female autocrat sitting on the throne of power) who is perceived as "Durga" the all-conquering goddess of Hindu mythology' (Guha, 462) is Mrs. Indira Gandhi. She leverages two vital archetypes used in Indian culture and mythology viz. of the mother and the goddess, thereby subverting the male dominance in political discourse.

Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One's Own* (1929) contends, "A woman must have money and room of her own if she is to write fiction" (14). Fiction writing, here, corresponds to myriad professions that a woman undertakes to wield her identity in both personal and public domains. In "Passion for India" (1989), Nayantara Sahgal confesses:

> I never did set out to be a writer. There were so many other things one was supposed to be doing. Our society conditions young girls to believe that Real life consists of getting married, having children, promoting one's husband's career by planning huge, endless meals for overfed people, buying the latest model of this and that, and so forth. I did all these things for years, writing books in between doing them, always feeling guilty about my writing, as women are supposed to be round-the-clock wives, mothers, and housekeepers. It was, in fact, only four years ago I acquired a room of my own to write in. (82)

Sahgal and Sonali correspond in multiple ways. Their maternal ancestry is Kashmiri and Sonali is critical of Kashmiri kith and kin, of marriage, of dynastic rule/power; echoing in higher frequency Sahgal's opinions and criticisms. Sonali views "But Kashmiri or no Kashmiri, there

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was no getting away from marriage. It was what life was about, from Kabul to the sea" (56). To escape from the myriad possibility of encountering 'suitable' marriage proposals, Sonali excels to get stardom in her studies abroad at Oxford, "to deliverance from suitable "boys" and marriage," "to everything afterwards, from a career of my own to not wearing contact lenses and wanting my living room to look my own" (58). Sonali canvasses Ravi Kachru's belief in "the many-armed goddess" (Mrs. Gandhi) and family rule by juxtaposing it with age-old belief in *Sati* that is terminated in modern India, for abandoning exasperation and safeguarding socialism. Sahgal too targets and criticises the other beneficiaries of the family cult (Nehru family) who are glad to fan the feudal flame and keep it alive. Nehru and Nehruvian ideology have naturally influenced her writing of this novel that vocalises a so-called democratic nation's non-adherence to democracy, socialism, equality, freedom, and more.

Sonali's resolute and undeterred identity as an IAS officer is shattered into pieces during the Emergency rule when she is demoted to junior post. Her impeccable and morally predominated service to the nation is discounted for a meagre interest of powerful people. However, her 'modern' self is elevated as she endeavours to assist Rose in her quest for justice thereby resisting the clutches of power. As Jean Baker Miller (1987) says "women stay with, build on, and develop in a context of attachment and affiliation with others" (83), and hence, for several women, such "threat of disruption of an affiliation is perceived not just as a loss of relationship but as something closer to a total loss of self" (Ibid). Notwithstanding the treachery, Rose's approach to her living and self relies on her relationship with Ram, as she confesses that she cannot bear divorce from him. Mona's condition is no different than Rose's. This sense of dependence restricts their way of personal growth and hence, could be one of the reasons of Rose being enslaved to gin (alcohol) and Mona getting succumbed to cancer. A closer glance at their plight divulges a strong fact that despite having connection with people

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belonging to the "pinnacle of power" none of their problems "get solved in a jiffy" (158). Their identity of being subordinate and submissive variable is reinforced.

Nishi discards the female identity as a child bearer for she has never wished to have one but produced two children against her will- "A stranger laid the child she hadn't wanted and next year the second child she did not want, like trophies beside her and took them away to the trophy room when she shut her eyes pretending sleep or death" (263-64). She equates the possession of children with trophies as if it is a reward for a married woman to consolidate her societal or marital status. Sahgal through Nishi's voice criticises the parochial attitude of society towards females. Jasbir Jain in "Nayantara Sahgal" (2004) highlights the unconventional and subversive nature of Sahgal's stand on women and female sexuality and the concern with women's right to their body. She says, "she can be singled out for her boldness in relating the issue of sex, to individual freedom, and the desire to free a woman from being treated as a possession" (129).

Mona's identity is negotiated through her relationship with other family members. Being sentient to the household chores, her husband's fickle interest, and child's overt claim for attention, her identity is confined as a diligent homemaker, faithful (yet envious) wife, and caring mother who pours unconditional love on her only child Devikins. In short, Mona is restrained by the preconceived roles or expectation that a society generally imposes on women. Her sense of self is constrained by the expectations and duties imposed upon her by her familial and marital obligations. Her silent weeping within the confines of the four walls after Rose's arrival as Ram's second wife corroborates her further submission to Hindu orthodoxy. Much rather disputing with Ram for the sake of asserting her position, she surrenders to pay service to God.

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In a nation like India where diverse culture coexist either in chaos or harmony, Rose's identity as British descent is perceived as 'other.' However, this 'other' is celebrated in a seemingly gratifying manner as soon as she indulges in Gandhian discourse that has whirled the whole nation in its splendour and inevitability. Whereas Lalaji disowned foreign products for the sake of his strong conviction to promote raw and reliable Indian products and greater urge to get freedom from two-hundred years old British rule, Rose initially seemed no less than a threat to him considering her British descent. However, it is noteworthy that their relationship takes a turn when he finds Rose embodying Gandhian doctrines that appear to be fading under the political environment created by the then Prime Minister Mrs. Indira Gandhi- as Janet Powers writes in her work "Polyphonic Voices in Nayantara Sahgal's *Rich Like Us*" (2003) "though an outsider, and a vestige of colonial authority, she thus represents the Gandhian values which are becoming lost to the nation under the governance of Indira Gandhi" (104). Rose boldly speaks her mind and heart out even on political discourse in the family where her blunt opinion on "emperor's new clothes" shattered the fragile outlook of the listeners. She performs the role of a forthright critic who breaks the monotony of prejudices in several parts of the novel through her acute observation. For instance, she resists Leila calling the love scenes embarrassing for the servants and later highlights the fiasco in the lives of these working-class people whose wives often become prey to the lecherousness of policemen. She says, "So, wot's the 'arm if they see a bit of kissing on the screen? Less embarrassing than wot they see in real life," (218). Besides this, Rose's keen observation of the "sleeping arrangements in joint families" (210) where men's beds and women's beds line up in separate verandahs do not cohere with the number of children, they reproduce despite such arrangement calls attention to the lack of openness in defining relationships and tradition of keeping secrecy in Indian joint families.

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To sum up, Sahgal's dexterous orientation of her heroines' inner or private and outer or public identities speaks volume of her own stand as a writer. The female characters are not alien. She uses her writing to inform readers about an ongoing journey of self-discovery and connection with her characters, as well as providing insights into Indian culture and mythology. The themes including the clash between traditional and modern values, Hinduism, and her admiration for the teachings of Gandhi affect their identity. From Rose's boldness and outspoken personality, Sonali's strong willpower and unconventional ideology, and Nishi's enigmatic nature to Mona's sense of simplicity, one can discover the traits that make them exceptionally apart from each other. They embody the desire for independence, compassion, and morality. They possess a purity of heart, mind, and spirit that reflects an untainted innocence and honesty. Their struggles against patriarchal traditions and societal expectations highlight the challenges that women face in asserting their identities and achieving autonomy. The multiple references to Sati and Sita serve to illustrate the historical and cultural context that has shaped these struggles, and underline the necessity for women to challenge and transform these traditions. Overall, the novel offers a nuanced and thought-provoking exploration of female identity, one that is grounded in the specific cultural and social realities of contemporary India. Sahgal underscores a poignant commentary on the versatility of female identity in a society delineating rigid social structure and political upheaval. This subtly instils into the female characters a sense of power to resist, and faith in modernity despite complying with their traditional roles, and eccentricity.

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