

Nayantara Sahgal's *Rich like Us*: A Thematic Analysis

Dr. Kiranjeet Kaur Bedi

Asstt.Prof. [English]

Dept.of Humanities & So. Sciences

NIT Raipur

The novels of Nayantara Sahgal deal with a wide gamut of themes ranging from personal dilemma and problems, joys and sorrows fulfillment and frustrations of female protagonists to the political upheavals that India has experienced since Independence. Her proximity to political power has enabled her to project the kaleidoscopic view of the political changes in the country. She indeed is the ring-side view of the happenings behind the political and bureaucratic curtains.

Rich like us portrays a nation which once embraced the hallowed Gandhian ideals and which in modern times has repudiated with a vengeance, as it were, Gandhi and all that he stood for in his life and politics. M.K.Naik observes that the real test of political novel is in its preservation of the

integrity of its fictional values of the ensuring that politics permeates the work either in the form of ideas and ideology or in respect of setting action as genuinely non-political literature.”¹

Rich like us is set in the 70s when the sacrifices and visions of the freedom fighters had been all but forgotten. It is complex novel with plurality of narrative voices and enigmatic ending and does not end itself to simple straight forward interpretations and characters. Judged from this norm *Rich like us* can be considered artistically successful novel.

The story of the novel is silhouetted against the backdrop of the Indian socio-political ethos, its economic disparities, rampant corruption, the hoary past with the cruel tradition of sati and the political upheavals of 1975. Sonali Ranade, an upright civil servant in the Ministry of Industry is pitted against the contemporary bureaucratic regime. Sonali heroically fights the malice in the bureaucratic hierarchy which has seeped to the core and corroded the Indian society and its long cherished values. While most of the Indian novels in English portray the stereo-typed versions of Indian womanhood. Sonali in *Rich like us* is made of quite a different stuff. A top notch at the IAS competitive examinations. She has the intellectual strength to rebel against hackneyed thoughts, outdated customs anachronistic rituals. She knows and lets the world know that she is not

out for an arranged marriage and the consequent life of intellectual inertia. Her destiny is, elsewhere. After completing her studies in India she goes to Oxford for higher studies. Her rebellion against society is not merely a passive ideological resistance; it is a concrete manifestation of carving a new image in a new purpose to Indian Womanhood. She has inherited her values and ideals from her conscientious who was an ICS officer in Colonial India. With an admirable rare courage Sonali refuses to grant permission to open the fizzy drink Hapyola factory to Dev the spoilt son of Mona and Ram. She rebels overtly and fearlessly against the bureaucratic set up. Patriotic, committed and honest that she is Sonali suffers a rude jolt when she gets her transfer order. Instead of receiving appreciation for having done her duty with a sense of patriotism, she is victimized by the bureaucratic system.

Ravi Kachru an Oxford educated officer is an ardent supporter of the clannish dynastic succession, (p-31). He replaces Sonali as joint secretary and thus Sonali's destiny comes to a dead end. After the death of her father she has none among his survivors who can measure and understand her deep sense of agony and isolation.

The alienness of what had just happened, the midnights knock at mid day, for no reason. I could understand paralysed me, until I realized that nothing new or shattering had happened after all. No malign fate had singled me out for punishment. The logic of June 26th had simply caught up with me (p-32).

Sonali feels bitter and frustrated that the society she lives in rates those in power higher and more important than the honest and upright officers. She feels completely alienated and her sense of rejection reacts with a determination not to 'grovels and beg favours and act like a worm instead of a person.' (P-37) The strength of Sahgal's novel is in her honest upholding of human values. Sonali feels more human and less bureaucratic when she talks from Rose to her desk before she bids farewell to her office. Later in the story Sonali's sympathetic and an understanding friend Rose loses her life in the hands of her stepson Dev's hired goon. The tragedy reflects the bitter truth that women in India are mercilessly murdered by her own relatives when it suits them whatever reasons. Sonali's great grandmother met with a similar fate in 1905. Rose's untimely death leaves Sonali bereft and lonely. Sonali and Rose share certain ideas and basic human approach to love its problem. Rose lends meaning to other people's life even after death. As a case of Beggar whom she used to feed and who finds meaning and purpose in life.

Nayantra Sahgal invests reality as a springboard to realize her vision of fulfillment in the life of her characters. Her novel Prove that the theme shapes the form and the form of her novels is bright with the real life becomes inseparable in her fiction. She explores the

spirit of freedom through the consciousness of heroine, and its significance in the lives of other less important characters like Kishorilal. *Rich like us* can be described as what, John Barth calls the “literature of replenishment” Sahgal tells the story and looks at life at least in the present novel, from two planes of view. One is the Omniscient author’s and the other is Sonali the heroine’s. The novel is admired for its creative innovation and optimistic vision of life. Her story is told in the third person by the authorial narrative voice and in the first person in the voice of the heroine. By the artistic alternative of the focus between these two points of view are the two angles of the vision, the novelist projects a social-political reality at two-levels the level of the masses and the level of the individual. This symbolizes two classes into which the character in the novel seems to fall naturally. The technique of twofold vision enables Sahgal to portray vividly the two Indias-the India of the rich western educated, ruling elite, and Bharat the India of a poor toiling mass of humanity which has been denied the fruits of India’s independence. The two Indias do not complement each other; rather they are in sharp contrast with each other and with unbridgeable gulf between them.

The novels make use of some editorials and letters written to the editors of the newspapers as a form of Historical evidence. One of them is an editorial of the Calcutta gazette of the 7th Dec’ 1829 which expresses supreme pleasure and celebrates the Act of Abolition of the cruel right of sutti passed by Lord William Bentinck. The English administrator is applauded for his reform which has ended “a system demoralizing in its effect on the living, a revolting system of suicide and murder.”(p134), Sonali discovers yet another instance of suttee which dates back to 29th Dec’ 1929 as recorded in the Bombay Courier .By quoting these documents the novelist juxtaposes the dead past with the living present bringing both into sharp focus of contrast.

Sonali, instead of commenting on the observations of these news items just shifts the focus of narration of her father’s heroic efforts to avenge his mother’s murder. It reflects her insight into the human spirit and its usage for justice and freedom in her present context. She juxtaposes the acts of injustice and cruelty of the past with those in the emergency regime of contemporary times. As an administrator she may be passive, but this technique of fusing the past with the grim present provides a ray of hope. she comments; “ not all of us passive before cruelty and depravity. He (her father) had not been nor the boy in Connaught place.”(p152).

Thus, Sahgal in *Rich Like Us* use the historical facts to enrich the form and content of her narrative. Sonali feels relieved at the end when Ram’s old flame Marcella offers unstinted help and hope to Sonali’s clouded future. She and Brian, her husband encourages Sonali to take up a research project on seventeenth and Eighteenth century India. Politics and the way in which historical forces and the individual interact and how major historical events shape individual lives have always been of interest to the creative imagination since the

Greek and Roman epics and the Mahabharata. As Orwell wrote elsewhere, “there is no such thing as genuinely non-political literature.”

Rich Like Us is set in the 70s when the sacrifices and visions of the freedom fighters had been all but forgotten. It is complex novel with plurality of narrative voices and enigmatic ending and does not lend itself to simple straight forward interpretations. As Jasbir Jain observes, “*Rich Like us* offers no easy, solutions to mankind problems on the contrary it challenges all known solutions . . . finally *Rich Like Us* is the about the complex nature of reality.” The implicit suggestion of the novel that personal feeling for others on a human and humane level can lead to redemption of a kind. There is certainly no conventional poetic justice in the novel. It is not a story where virtue is rewarded and vice punished but one of glorification, the courage and the good, attributing to them a kind of redemptive power even in death.

The politically committed character in the novel finds himself unable to sustain his Marxist ideals when faced with the real world. Ravi Kachru, when at oxford, was a committed communist. Sonali, the western educated part narrator says:

Even when we did not agree with him he was the inspiration of all us radicals and we never did understand why instead of throwing in his lots with the commitments after Oxford changed his mind and joined the civil-service as I, in search of another kind of involvement had already decided to do. Within a few years Ravi is making his way up there hierarchy, and when the Emergency comes, he is one of Mrs. Gandhi’s favorites. The “higher-up”.(p-176)

By the end of the novel, he falls from political grace but finally attain maturity to be honest on a personal level. After Ravi’s Plea to her of his continuing love, Sonali finds that:

This admission of waste, of years gone and opportunity lost, filled me with a sweet relief. Isolated from all that had happened outside our private creation it had the wonder for me of broken ends mending, Kachru becoming Ravi again, of friendship resuming, of love having been really love and not a mistake he had been trying to forget.(p-261)

Thus the strong political commitment of a young man is projected as merely a phase on the path to maturity.

Sonali himself has a set of ideas which are rudely shaken by the events of 1976. her Marxist commitment had been different from that of Ravi’s:

Our heart beats quite differently over our discovery of it(Marxism), his for humanity, mine for small actual conscience pricking images giving me a scratchy inner lining of anxiety (p-110).

Already Sonali's commitment is closer to reality, and she refuses to be carried away by ideology. later she says that:

Only the cloudiness commitment, like the perfect relationship, could be knocked sideways with a feather. It was doubts and uncertainties that kept things alive and kicking (p-261).

Her strong sense of service receives a blow when she is reverted from her responsible position in the civil service because she refuses permission for a preposterous proposal, requiring the import of more or less an entire factory (p-29).

The unknown proposal to her had the blessings of her superiors. Despite her feeling that she was pretending the Emperor's new clothes were beautiful', it is implied that she would have acted in the same way even if she had known that the proposal had high political backing. Being impossible for her to continue working in such a corrupt environment, in any case:

The emergency has finished my career, but suddenly I did not want a career in the crumbling unprofessionalism that bowed and scraped to a bogus emergency. (P-36) Her father's stern decision not to compromise with dictatorship is regarded by Sonali as: him at his strong and positive best. (P-175) Through grief stricken at his death, she condemns 'suttee' for its cruelty, I saw a world revealed by strangely enough it was not the evil in it saw Not all of us are passive before cruelty and depravity And I fell asleep to dream of heroisms whose company I was scarcely fit to keep. (P-152)

The obvious message is: individual acts of bravery, to save one's loved ones or even oneself from death, degradation or disaster are always worth doing whether one succeeds in meeting or achieving one's ends.

Rose, the London-born second wife of a rich businessman, could be seen as epitomizing this ideal of redemption through personal courage. She risks marrying Ram despite knowing about his being married and comes to India along with him. She saves Mona, Ram's first wife from suicide and inspire of their initial antagonism, soon develops friendly terms with her. The crippled beggar completely neglected by the family is also helped by her. Her outspokenness and cockney bluntness-the principal characteristics makes her unpalatable to her step son-Dav. Though Ross- a brave women yet is doomed by her honesty and her invidious position in Dav's household after her husband is incapacitated by illness. Her position as virtual widow leads to her death arranged, as 'sati' usually is, by her husband's relatives and partly motivated by the same economic reasons. Sonali following Rose's murder. And Kishorilal, who is at first prepared to renounce his political allegiances to obtain his release from prison, finally refuses to be released and leave his young cell-mate behind. The brave, the incorrupt, the outspoken in face of evil are admirable and inspiring, although they may not be rewarded either in this

life or any other. It is certain that there is no religious orthodoxy propounded in Rich like Us.

An over dramatic and somewhat ridiculous Hindu rites e observed by Mona. Hinduism is not capable of explaining evil and hence rejected by Sonali's grandfather. In an interview Sahgal said that, 'Mortality is ingrained deeply in every one of us, thought may vary in details. The idea of individual morality seems to underpin her writing in Rich like Us.

Colonialism or Colonial Consciousness is another important aspect in the novel that requires to be defined. In 'Orientalism' Edward said highlights the limitation imposed on a nation by colonial consciousness. One perceives oneself through the eyes of other and judges one by their standards by measuring oneself against their yardsticks. It is extracted that colonial consciousness consists of two stages. One of acceptance of the imperial model and the other turning away from it both having dependent and imbalanced relationship. The third and final stage is a moving away from these secondary positions to a position of critical identification of one's own culture, of being in position to sift and to criticize, a stance which is marked by an adult maturity. This transition to the post colonial awareness is characterized by an ability to step outside the given and to reject the simplistic division of the 'good' and 'bad' and to forge an independent identity. This novel is remarkable for its non-emotional treatment of matters which had carlier forced the writer into position of political partnership. This is attained by the gently irony, the humor and the distance. The peculiar depiction is made of Dev's treatment of his wife Nishi and his step-mother Rose. Women like the colonial people are treated with indifference or with ruthlessness. Similar to the colonial word, their decisions governed by the need to survive. Very often they are a long succession of compromises and sacrifices, a constant pushing of the I into the background. As opposed to this, men ride roughshod over the women's emotional requirements and reject long term solutions if short-term gains are in sight. Though it seems to be an over-generalization, yet mostly the men are found to be the exploiters. Divorce may be a way out for women, but bigamy is the rule for men; for instance- Ram having two wives in Rich Like us.

It was always Sita who had to pray to be swallowed by the earth, and always a woman who had to climb her husband's pyre and be burned alive (p-67) This was a part of second relationship and as much colonial as the political relationship and as much colonial as the political relationship was with Britain especially during the world wars when order had to be obeyed and not decisions independently arrived at.

In a Colonial situation any act of defiance is viewed as treason and the punishment for it or any act of questioning is death. Moral principles, concepts or right or wrong are waved aside in view of political expediency or goals. Such a situation is brought into being during the Emergency as described in Rich like Us. Sonali is demoted and removed from her position in the ministry, and Ravi Kachru angles his way into the corridors of power.

Rose is murdered and Dev gets away with the act of forgery. No longer it is a question of right and wrong but increasingly one of power vs. powerlessness. It is a repeat act and an eye-opener at that *Rich Like Us* sets out to analyse the Indian heritage which is not all bliss and not all same. The bits of evil which surface here are not all the result of a colonial aftermath they are bits of the Indian Heritage with its ratio, class-system and caste-division, and with India's inability to generate and persist in a native morality. The Gandhian episode begins to appear not as a continuation of a tradition, but a flash in the pan which was now over.

Rich Like Us is important for more reasons than one: it comments on the political situation which has colonial overtones, it analyses the flow in the native tradition and it justifies the moral struggle so important and significant for survival of the human being.

Works Cited:

1. MK Naik. "The Indian English Political Novel" Dimensions Indian English Literature, (New Delhi: Sterling, 1985) PP-130-131.
2. George Orwell, "The Prevention of Literature" in The Orwell Reader, (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1965) P.373.
3. Jasbir Jain, "The Emperor's New Clothes: The Emergency and Sahgals *Rich Like Us*" in The New Indian Novel in English: A study of the 1980s (New Delhi: Allied Publishers, 1990) p.34.