

## PROBLEMS OF WOMEN IN NAYANTARA SAHGAL'S *RICH LIKE US*

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### **Abstract:**

*Nayantara Sahgal has very brilliantly explored the issues of women in her novel "Rich Like Us." The novel highlights the burning problems of women very minutely. The novel brings to us the plights of women who frequently become the victim of the conventional Indian society in their quest for identity. Sahgal describes her feeling through the protagonist, Sonali. The suffering, subjugation and ordeal of woman from mythology to history foreground the injustice and marginalization women all throughout the ages in man dominated society. Sahgal would like to eradicate any kind of injustice towards women.*

**Keywords:** Indo-Anglian Fiction Nayantara Sahgal: "Rich Like Us".

Sahgal projects her protagonist, Sonali to express her feelings towards the problems of women. Sahgal is against any kind of discrimination towards women. No society can be developed without the development of women. The feminist concern in "Rich Like Us" is all set in Sonali's questioning of gender and her protest against her Kashmiri mother's insistence on her romanticized marriage and wedded life, status and snobbery of state and region. Though her sister Kiran willingly opted for a safe and complacent marriage with Neel, Sonali is assertive and doesn't come under the pressure of the family for marriage. She takes pleasure in being different from the docile stereotype Indian women surrendering to the will of their parents for marriage. Her reaction to family members planning for her marriage reflects her independent attitude:

*'A boy for Sonali' sent me into tantrums in my early teens. 'Really Sonali, there's no need to start screaming and shouting like a jungli whenever marriage is mentioned. Nobody's forcing you.' Nobody was forcing me. They were just waiting to catch me like flying fish are caught when they leap up out of the waves, like Bimmie had been caught in mid air tossing a basketball into a net, waiting to say Ha! Got you! And turn you into a sweet and docile nature.*

(Sahgal 55)

Love is natural to human beings. While studying together at Oxford Sonali comes in close relationship with her childhood friend Ravi Kachru as it has sanction of her family, he being a Kashmiri.

*"While our mothers schemed and waited for us to cross degree hurdle. And then! A marriage joined form top to bottom by cast, community and background."*

(Sahgal 56)

This is a common sight in majority of Indian families, where the girls are nurtured right from their childhood to imbibe the patriarchal values of the family. They are not given freedom either in selection of their career or life partners. Whatever their parents impose upon them, they have to accept it. They are not allowed to compete with the male members of the family. Sonali's mother too is a typical Indian mother but unable to tame her second daughter. Sonali chooses a professional career as she does not want her freedom and choice to be seized. She distances herself from Ravi perceiving a wide gap in their ideology. Their relation gradually breaks down because Ravi advocates Marxism whereas Sonali is disillusioned by it:

*"Mine was no romance with Marxism. Ravi's was. Our hearts beat quite differently over our discovery of it, his for humanity, mine for small actual conscience-pricking images, giving me a scratchy inner lining of anxiety."*

(Sahgal 110)

She expresses her faith in Gandhism and is not ready to blindly follow the Western ideologies. She revolts at the idea of Western imposition on the east:

*"But I could not understand why we had to keep cutting and pasting western concepts together and tying ourselves to them for ever as if Europe were the centre of the universe, and the Bible and Marx were the last word on mankind."*

(Sahgal 113)

Another setback to their relationship as future husband and wife is caused by the Emergency when she receives an emotional jolt as her fiancé Ravi replaces her in the office of Union Ministry of Industry as Joint Secretary. In this difficult situation, she is forced to compromise with the higher echelons of civil services which runs the govt. machinery. She rather fights her lone battle boldly as a woman, as the citizen of a free country. Sonali prefers to resign than to be cowed down and face humiliation.

Besides Sonali's true feminist non-submissiveness, *"Rich Like Us"* also brings out the voices of other women characters to the forefront. Sonali after being disengaged from the burden of her office shares her emotional conflict with Rose, the cockney Memsahib and the second wife of Ram. The novel is dedicated to 'The Indo-British Experience' and Sahgal exposes the myth and culture of Britain and India both of which creates stereotypes and place woman in powerless position. Ram frequently on business trips to London. She is swayed by the richness and elegance of Ram. They marry and come back to India. When she comes to India, she discovers that Mona is already in Ram's life with her child Dev and she is to share Ram's love and house with Mona. Both the women feel cheated. Ram has no guilty conscience for his act as he is a male and architect of patriarchal order of our society. He rather defends his bigamy taking recourse to mythical and religious stories of Lord Krishna having three hundred wives and the Islam permitting four wives for a man.

After initial problems in living together, Rose learns to live in the circumstances she is cast to.

*"She had survived the shocks of first weeks of adjustment. She and Ram no longer quarreled. They conversed, like two reasonable middle-aged people with their tempers behind them. Rose felt angry, bitter, wronged."*

(Sahgal 62)

Rose's arrival in Ram's life creates a vacuum in Mona's. She feels humiliated and suffers from the pangs of losing her claim over him. In desperation she tries to commit suicide but fortunately she is saved. Rose's life is also not rosy. She is neglected by Ram when he develops an affair with Marcella; the so-called intellectual love. 'She has walked into their life with the effortless, guiltless ease of the ruling class, and occupied it.' Now it is her turn to experience the sleepless nights as Mona had when she entered the house and usurped her haven of peace through neglect of Ram's love for Mona. Thus both Mona and Rose suffer under the male egoism of Ram and are made to feel 'lonely, anguished, helpless and oppressed'. Their economic dependency and 'where-to-go' factors also forces them to allow a free play of Ram's romance and bear upon the traditional sanction of his bigamy. At one point when Ram returns from England after Marcella's departure, Rose thinks of giving him a verbal thrash.

*"She wanted to give Ram a furious shaking and ask him what he meant by bland assumption that they would go on exactly as before, as though there had been no break in their married life"*

(Sahgal 215)

But surprisingly giving a 'furious shake' doesn't materialize. She knows that she has left her home, homeland, career, and having had no formal education, she rather prefers to compromise. Her condition becomes worse when control of the family is transferred from one patriarch to other, from Ram to Dev. Ram is lying paralyzed and useless. Dev draws money illegally from his father's bank account on forged signature in conspiracy with bank authority. When a complaint is lodged by Rose and Sonali the bank expresses its inability to stop encashment of cheques because Dev holds a high position in the political circle. Rose who got a legal claim of share in Ram's property is rendered penniless. 'It is so uncomfortable having to ask for every paisa'. Dev is completely fed up with Rose for her constant nagging and conspires to put an end to her life. Ultimately she is murdered and eliminated by the Youth brigade of the political party that was behind Dev's rise to power during emergency. Nishi attributes her death to drunkenness and Ram's prolonged illness. Sonali suspects that it's a murder and her apprehension is confirmed by the eye-witnessed account of the beggar:

*"- a youth camp tough suffocating her with a sack descending over her head, another pinioning her arms, both of them carrying her out where else but to the well where her body was found?"*

(Sahgal 257)

Besides Sonali and Rose, *Rich Like Us* focuses on agony and pangs of other woman characters too who suffocate beneath the heavy weight of patriarchy. Sahgal's portrayal of Nishi, Dev's wife is that of a typical all-submissive daughter-in-law in contrast to Sonali the feminist. She comes from a lower middle-class family. She first adopts the role of a loyal daughter to her father and after marriage like a devoted wife dances to the tune of her husband for the rest of her life. She gives in to her husband silently in whatever he does whether right or wrong. That's why she bears with Dev's denigration of her father Kishori Lal who has been jailed during emergency for being an RSS activist. Sahgal's ironies pick up Nishi's maladjustments and acceptances, born of class and poverty which imprison her being. As a woman of traditional social order she knows her limitations. Unlike Sonali she opts to live with the tragedy of her divided being, knowing her need as a woman, yet screening herself:

*"Grappling with selves was simple if she kept her inner and outer selves apart. Pulling them together showed the world as it was, and her single will, defiant, disobedient and distraught, confronted it."*

(Sahgal 234)

In *Rich Like Us*, a subject which occupies ample space is the commission of sati. Sahgal here initiates a postcolonial discourse on pre colonial historic past of India. She doesn't take recourse to the glorification. Sonali, after her father's death finds his diary written in 1915. She comes to know through it about the barbarism of the evil practice of sati, particularly of her great grand-mother. It questions the complexity of Hinduism, the status of Hindu wife and a widow and also the laxity of the British administration in implementing the Act. The horror of sati and ineffectiveness of the British law is evident in the commission of sati by the great grand-mother of Sonali. When her great grand-father died at the age of fifty, his wife, and the great grand-mother of Sonali was forced to commit sati. It was not a voluntary act for her, but a bargain by the relatives to send her son abroad for higher studies. The pages of the book speak of many such stories of this inhuman barbarism. Sahgal deconstructs the idea that:

*"the sati lives with her husband in the unbroken felicity of swarga for thirty three millions of years at the end of which period she is reborn in a noble family, and reunited to the same well-beloved lord."*

(Sahgal 142)

In many cases becoming sati is not a voluntary walk unto the pyre of their dead husbands; it's a forced march covered and shield by frenzied drum beats and music of the relatives who may be eyeing the

complete share of the dead.

Apart from exposing the sufferings of the three major women characters in the novel in the patriarchal framework of Indian society, Sahgal interrogates the differences and preferences in rearing up of male and female child. At one point in the novel, Sonali's outbursts over the psychological gap in her and Ravi's outlook in relating it to the difference in their socialization comes out vividly:

*"I think he said that because he was a man. He had never fought a battle for freedom, never patted firmly when his sap was rising, never had sari throttling his legs, making walking in the wind and running to catch a bus a threat to life and limb, never had his mother set up a bowel when he went and got a hair cut."*

(Sahgal 112)

The psychology of a girl child is shaped from the very childhood with a straight jacket of restrictions, while a male child is offered to be macho and sexually assertive. Dev's bringing up by his father Ram is a fitting example of the patriarchal protectionism for male child:

*"But what troubled her (Rose) most was a sugar-coated glaze Ram had dropped over Dev. 'My son' had to be spoken in holy whisper. Never mind if he hijacked cars for fun, boys will be boys.*

*- And when Dev and his picture going, ice-cream guzzling gang took to abducting girls from Miranda House at the university and taking them to a private room at the Ashoka for a lark, these little escapades were part of growing up."*

In Sahgal's fictional world recurring references related to suffering, subjugation and ordeal of woman from mythology to history foregrounds the injustice and marginalization women all throughout the ages in patriarchy. Sahgal is of the opinion that legislation alone cannot bring about a change in the status of woman and put them as equal to their male counterpart. Though sati was abolished through legislation in India in the year 1829, cases of woman committing sati are still reported. Sahgal wants the complete transformation in the social set up where women are considered a second grade citizen. She wants to see the society where there is no discrimination between man and woman. Women should be given equal status and rights so that they may live happily.

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