



Feminism in Nayantara Sahgal's *Rich like Us*

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Feminism is a concept whose focus is women and the future of woman in society which is at the heart of a radical movement striving to create a brave new world for woman. Nayantara Sahgal who is a well-known Indian writer and a family member of one of the country's most high-profile political family viz Nehru-Gandhi family. Nayantara Sahgal's progress as a novelist, however bears testimony to the fact that she has been towards a definite feminist position, so that the women's experience does not merely provide data but are actually organized in such a way that they become an exercise in raising consciousness and critic of society with its unequal gender roles and the power distribution involved in them. Sahgal presents in her novel *Rich Like Us* the problems that the contemporary women face in society and in their struggle towards self-realization. She not only deals with the questions of marriage, sexuality and woman's equality with man but also raises the question of love, hatred, jealousy and certain other human emotions and values. Moreover, she also presents an antithesis between idealism and pragmatism, illusion, and reality. Sahgal has a humanitarian approach and is extremely sensitive to Indian womanhood as being wronged. In this novel, she reflects the tension between the predicament of the contemporary Indian woman and the traditional Hindu culture. She studies the social forces working on the psychology of Indian women.

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In India, a woman must necessarily be virtuous, chaste, submissive, homely and devoted to her family as she is considered an embodiment of sacrifice, silent suffering, faith and knowledge. Women are expected to seek pleasure in these domains of life. A woman's status is based primarily on the simple fact that she is the bearer of children and their concern is her primary responsibility; thus, her sphere is restricted to her familial roles. Nayantara Sahgal's opinion: "I try to create the virtuous woman the modern Sita, if you like. My women are strivers, and as priors towards freedom, towards goodness, towards a compassionate world."

She has portrayed the problems of personal relationships and have effectively created in an inner drama that dramatizes the man woman relationship and have advanced themselves towards an innovative creation. In *Rich Like Us* Sahgal presents three women characters from different backgrounds and in three dimensions. Sahgal concentrates primarily on single and married women. She examines with keen sensitivity and perception the sufferings and problems of women in marriage who feel completely entrapped, depressed, oppressed, suppressed and doomed to the care of husband and home. Mona in *Rich like Us* is one such woman who submits herself to Ram. She is the example of a typical Hindu woman who dares not raise a voice against any action of her husband. When Ram brings home his second wife, Rose, she does not utter a single word against his action but weeps in silence. In spite of raising her voice, she keeps a fast and holds prayers to thank God for his safe return:

The first one Rose remembered was the elaborate prayer chanted in thanksgiving by Mona's priest for Ram's safe return. And then Mona's voice instructing servants hurrying between kitchen and backyard, directing the feeding of beggars once a week, the voice of the mistress of the house, whoever else might be in it. The week had another day when the mistress fasted for her husband's long life and prosperity. And apart from Mona's fasts and prayers, there were Mona's loud insistent tears. (*Rich like Us* 45)

Rose, the second wife of Ram, is so deeply in love with him that she leaves her home and country despite knowing the fact that he had a wife and an infant child. She had gone far ahead in love until Ram revealed the truth to her and it was not possible for her to look back. In an interview with Sahgal, Varalakshmi says,

She (Rose) keeps thinking that it is her destiny that Ram walked in one day and captivated her and she had no option but to follow him wherever...across the seas or over the mountains or wherever he would have taken her. It is the destiny of anyone who is struck like that by lightning to behave in this (An Interview with Nayantara Sahgal 18)

Ram in *Rich like Us* seems to be very indifferent to the sentiments of a woman and inflicts great emotional violence on both the women he marries. He does not care about the feelings of his first wife Mona, and brings an English wife Rose after Mona has given birth to his son. Besides, he reveals the truth to Rose about his marriage with Mona and his infant child as though there was nothing serious about it, being very indifferent about her reaction to it. "And one afternoon he told her, in a natural everyday voice, that he has a wife and an infant child." (41) When Rose raises the question "How can we get married when you're married?" he has the audacity to answer: "My religion lets a man have more than one wife". (42)

Ironically, wronged by Ram, both Mona and Rose develop a hatred for each another. Mona tries to project herself as the mistress of the house and Rose desires in her heart to see Mona dead so that she may become the mistress of the entire house. One of Rose's more foolish fancies had been that everything would work out all right if Mona were dead: "If only she'd be dead, dead, dead, she had hammered out the thought night after night. It is wicked to think such thoughts. Rose, she has done you no harm, it isn't her fault. Mona was only two years older than herself, she wouldn't die for years. The three of them would live and die together, an impossible situation that entered the realm of possibility every morning when she went down the stairs into the household and tried to discover ways to make it work." (107) The agony and pain of Rose is also not understood by Ram who talks to her in a zestful manner. Rose tells Ram:

"I don't think I can make much more of this Ram" "Of what?" he had the temerity to ask: "You living with two wives." He was stretched out on his bed too good-humored and too lazy to quarrel: "Lord Krishna had three hundred." (63)

The husband in the Indian set-up has the social sanction to do whatever he can to satisfy himself but he cannot tolerate his wife if she indulges in anything which he feels is not proper. In *Rich like Us*, Ram Swaroop already has two wives at home, Mona and Rose, but he continues to develop ardent love affairs. He has the audacity to disclose to Rose about his affair with Marcella; he does not even care to hide it from Rose to save her from being hurt. Rather he comes home with "his footfall open and normal on the stair at three a.m." (115)

Rose suffered for months after this incident and she could get no comfort from anyone. Men seem to take pride in the fact that they are encircled by many women and they usually deprive women of togetherness and warmth. Love is nothing but fun for Ram Swaroop who is engaged in affairs with many women at the same time. The question of bigamy, which entails suffering and sacrifices for the co-wives Mona and Rose, is dealt with in this novel. In spite of getting all the love and care from his two wives, Ram gets infatuated

with Marcella, a young British lady, and falls deeply in love with her. Zafar, a friend of Ram, remarks: "You have the path to heaven all paved for you ... with a cocktail party upstairs. And prayer meeting downstairs."
(77)

Rose takes care of his sensual needs and Mona provides security to Ram's household but he wrecks their life by inflicting mental torture on both of them. Both women, being dependent on him, are exploited by him and he continues doing whatever he likes. Marriage for woman means a life of total dedication to one person whereas for man it means getting comfort at every level.

A single woman has no importance in our society and the practice of 'Sati' is a glaring example of a woman's plight. It is difficult for a single woman to survive in this society. Rich like Us presents ghastly accounts of the way in which widows were made to perform 'Sati' forcibly. Sonali, on reading her grandfather's manuscripts written in 1915, finds how widows were literally thrown into the funeral pyre of their husbands. In case they resisted, they were beaten with logs of wood and were forcibly thrown into the funeral pyre to die with their husband. In the manuscript, Sonali reads the incident of an unfortunate Brahminee who of her own accord has ascended the funeral pile of her husband's bones (for he had died at a distance). On finding the torture unbearable, she threw herself from the flames by a violent struggle and fell down. Some gentlemen who were present there immediately plunged her into the river, which was close by and thereby saved her from being burnt. On recovering her senses, she complained of the badness of the pile and expressed her willingness to try again if they could improve it. They did not do so and the poor creature shrank with dread from the flames which were now burning more intensely, and refused to go on. When the inhuman relatives saw this, they lifted her and threw her into the fire, and held her there till they were driven away by the heat. They also struck her with large blocks of wood in order to deprive her of her senses. She again made her escape and jumped into the river. The relatives tried to drown her by pressing her under water but she was saved by a gentleman present there. She was then sent to the hospital but, after lingering in most excruciating pain for twenty hours, she died.

Sonali's grandfather raised his voice against this evil practice and was very happy when in 1929 its practice was abolished but ironically his wife too was cruelly burnt alive by his relatives when he died.

A woman had no choice in the matter of marriage and had to remain devoted to her husband even if he was the crudest person on earth. The man, on the other hand, could leave his wife any time he wished and

remarry any other woman of his choice. The lines in the manuscript are worth-mentioning: "Yet the question remains: What kind of society is it that demands human sacrifice to appease the blood thirst of what kind of gods?"

The feeling of sisterhood where women develop solidarity and a deep social relationship amongst themselves is more pronounced in *Rich like Us*. In this novel, Sonali, a spinster and an I.A.S. officer, extends all her help and support to Ram's second wife Rose. Rose's stepson Dev intends to usurp her wealth and assets. Sonali not only arranges for a lawyer but also entertains Rose in the best possible manner in order to relieve her of her loneliness and misery. Though Sonali was younger to Rose, their relations were very intimate. After the death of Rose, Sonali seems to be the only person who laments her death. After her death, she spent a day in Rose's room and found it completely deserted. She began lifting her dresses off the hangers, taking clothes from drawers and laying them on her bed. She felt that with the end of her life, the use of these garments had also ended. She says: "In Kumar's haggard presence I sat on her bed on top of her dresses and cried as I had cried my heart out to Rose years ago in the hotel room in London." (286)

The relation of Rose and Mona is also another example of sisterhood. Although initially Rose and Mona could not accept each other and Rose in her heart of hearts wished Mona dead, later we find that they accept each other as sisters and Rose saved her life when she tried to commit suicide:

Mona sat cross-legged, her eyes closed, a band of flame advancing up her cotton sari, consuming it soundlessly while she submitted to the inevitable like a woman in disciplined child birth, her short agonized gasps barely audible. Rose dragged the cover off her bed with Kumar's help, wrapped it round Mona's struggling bod-' and got her out of the room.

After this incident Rose does not hate Mona, rather she sits "in front of her long delayed breakfast telling herself she was carrying fancy too far, only there was no denying that houses breathe in and out, sighs sink into walls and walls exhale them." The incident also changes Mona's attitude towards Rose. She starts appreciating her and welcomes her with her heart saying: "We are sisters." (175) They become good friends and mutually run the house and are living examples of two women being agonized by one man. Rose considers Dev, Mona's son, as her own and Dev too calls Mona Mama and Rose Mummy.

Everyone supports Rose after the death of her parents. Mona ordered the household to revolve around Rose and perform a religious ceremony for peace of her mind. She takes the loss of her parents as her own personal loss.

But said Rose feebly:

"if the ceremony is for me, why should you be the one to spend the day fasting?" Mona, categorical as ever, replied if we're a family, then we're a family. She starved herself all day with the energy of one for whom a fast is a positive act, breaking it at sundown with a horrible concoction consisting of smoking hot milk and soggy jalebies. (178)

Through the character of Mona and Rose, Nayantara Sahgal depicts the concept of sisterhood which means that women must develop friendship and assert their identification with each other.

In *Rich like Us*, Rose's musings on her childhood present a very poignant picture of women suffering because of pregnancies when abortion was not legally allowed. "Loving each other had fallen in to disuse" (66) between her parents as for her mother it was tired sex always accompanied with the fear of more mouths to feed. At a time when abortions were not legalized, "Miscarriages were better than nothing, but in the end you were back to full-term deliveries, your burnished and battered body returned, a loose empty sack to fill up again." (66)

Rose herself longs for a child when she first sees Dev, Ram's son from his first wife Mona. She wants to produce a son so that she may also be termed as the mistress of Ram's household but her dream remains unfulfilled. Ironically she is murdered years later at her stepson Dev's behest whose care Mona had made Rose's duty at the time of her own death.' Sonali in *Rich like Us* is a positive achievement of Nayantara Sahgal. She is born of intercaste marriage, her mother being a Kashmiri and her father a Maharashtrian I.C.S. officer. She escapes the net of marriage spread out by her parents by asserting her individuality. She tells her father: "I am going abroad after my B.A. I don't care if you didn't send Kiran, I'm not Kiran." She goes to Lucknow, works hard at her studies, sits for the I.A.S. exam and tops the list of successful candidates. On this occasion, she remembers her father's words: "Sonali, people like you, especially women like you, are going to Indianize India." (22)

Life for her is not easy in this male-dominated world, even though she is Joint Secretary in the Ministry of Industry. She refuses to make any compromises and finally is demoted and sent back to her home state and finally resigns her job. She says: "I hadn't merely been transferred without warning, I had been demoted, punished, and humiliated, and I had no inkling why." (27) She wrote about herself: "And then I had become the kind of woman, who highly concentrated on the subject in hand, is supposed to have 'a man's mind' and who disappoints the flirtatious and flippant." She has a strong individuality, is brave and opposes dictatorship,

"not even of the proletariat, not even as a passing phase because who knows the phase might get struck and never pass."

Sonali is a soft and kind-hearted girl. After the death of Rose she brings artificial hands for a beggar who lived near Rose's house. Rose sympathizes with him and often warns him not to go near the well for it could be very treacherous for a person without arms. Ironically Rose herself is thrown into the same well by her stepson Dev. Sonali tells the beggar that she had arranged the artificial hands for him and that it would take him a day or two to get them fitted. After he had learned to use them, he would be taught a trade. She says:

"He had been waiting for the news, and now that I had come, he said, his voice teary and rasping, he couldn't stay here anymore, not after what he had seen, 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?" (290)

Sonali, in spite of being unsuccessful in her personal and professional life, is not at all pessimistic. The remarks, with which the novel closes, reveal the mettle of which she is made:

"I went to work immersed in the past; I was preparing all the while for the future beyond Brian's country and his exhibition. Marcella has reminded me of it, made a gift of it to me. Though it was really Rose's legacy again, the paths that had crossed hers now crossing mine, reminding me I was young and alive, with my own country stretched out before me, waiting to be lived." (301)

In *Rich like Us*, Sahgal also depicts the miseries and sufferings of the low-class women and the treatment given out to them by the policemen. Their sufferings are beyond imagination and they are bound to live a wretched life. A servant tells Nishi, the daughter-in-law of Rose, about an incident when his wife had disappeared. He thought the police had grabbed her. The landowner who owned the cultivable land in the village and whom they worked for had sent for the police at the harvest time to make sure they didn't get off work, their full share of the crop, and didn't try any land-grabbing tricks as were going on in the area and could be catching. But the policemen, being jittered by feet marching in unison with scythes on shoulders and song being sung in the fields, had plundered the stored grain, smashed cooking vessels and set huts on fire if there was any resistance. They had made free and easy with the women, so lots of them had run away. His neighbour informed him that he had seen five women fleeing together towards Bakhadda. They were with eight policemen. Two of them lay on their sides chewing blades of grass. The rest were in a circle with one woman in the centre. He also saw through the shrubbery the top of a lathi raising the woman's sari above her

waist, poke and prod and turn her round and round like marionette. Another lathi joined the first. The other lay like overlapping corpses on the ground. He had vomited into the bushes but stayed crouched until he heard the clank of chains and the women being led away naked. After the crops have been harvested, he heard his wife had been taken along with few others to one of the brick-kiln-pig hole places along the Ganges. Nishi tells rose: "Don't now Mummy me. If you and I get raped the militia is out looking for the rascal. But their kind nobody bothers about." (277) After hearing the account of the poor miserable women, Rose says: "I can't see any of it 'appealing to you and me, can you?" (278)

In *Rich Like Us*, Nayantara Sahgal renders a living picture of the oppressed, depressed and suppressed life of women in India. She basically deals with two kinds of women: the first group of women is of those who are confined to a life of Hindu orthodoxy and the other of those who have a strong sense of individuality and an analytical mind but are shuffling between the traditional and modern values. There is also a juxtaposition of two worlds, the personal world of man-woman relationship and the impersonal world of politics. A point worth noting and mentioning at this stage is that Sahgal's aim is never to set one sex against the other. She, being aware of the feminist movement in the West, contributes to feminism in India in her own way. Her women characters try to become themselves by staying within the limits of the best Indian traditions and values.

Work Cited

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