Fractured Allegiances: The Individual and Democratic Ideals in Nayantara Sahgal's Rich Like Us

I. Venitha[1], Dr. K. Mohan[2]
[1]*Ph.D. Research Scholar, Department of English and Comparative Literature, Madurai Kamaraj University, Madurai*
[2]*Associate Professor and Head, Department of English and Comparative Literature, Madurai Kamaraj University College, Madurai*

***Abstract*—Rich Like Us by Nayantara Sahgal is a devastating questioning incident of the connection between individuals and democracy in one of the most perilous political eras in the history of India the Emergency (1975-77). The novel, through its twin leads, Rose and Sonali, discusses the theme of agency lost in the process of authoritarian governance and how the same affects not just the political system in place, but equally the morality and psychology of the lives that are adverse to it. This paper explores how Rich Like Us criticizes how a democratic principle is being abused in post- colonial India and that the personal struggles of the characters in the story are those who reflect the institutional rot in India. The novel ends up becoming the newfound place of the democratic ideals freedom, justice, equality, which are challenged by the lived experiences of the key characters of the novel. Another theme that comes out in this analysis is how Sahgal employs narrative structure and changing points of view to emphasize the disintegration of truth that prevails in a politically interfered world. This mixture of the personal and the political, the novel is able to show how institutional oppression makes dissent unheard and moral sense corrupt. Rich Like Us is therefore a critique of the particular historical turn, and at the same time, a reflection upon how prone democracy is to the onslaught of authoritarianism.**

***Index Terms*—Democratic ideals, Freedom, Individuals and Struggles.**

I. INTRODUCTION

Through the style of fiction being one of the instruments of political criticism in Rich Like Us, Sahgal questions the conflict between the freedom of individuals and the corruption of democratic rule. The action is of the Emergency period when the press was restricted in its freedoms and the civil liberties were suspended. The novel takes a reflection on the post-colonial democracies of India that were not taken as per change of the constitution. The liberal orientation and political lineage of Sahgal brings out the strong touch of politics to authoritarianism and political treachery of the Nehruvian ideals. In the paper, personal characters are explored in the face of the pressure of an undemocratic state, prefiguring the frailty of the idea of democracy when faced with power, manhood, and ambition to rule.

By the disparity in conditions of Sonali, the civil servant who gets disillusioned with state corruption and that of Rose, the British expatriate who finds herself in the whims and follies of Indian society, Sahgal shows how individual and political betrayals go hand in hand. The novel stresses on bureaucratic compliance and moral indifference as the means of authoritarian extravagance, frequently at the expense of personal bother someness. The critical analysis of mergency-era politics presented by Sahgal criticizes the state apparatus as well as the social organization that institutionalizes repression in society. The struggles that her characters experience internally are a metaphor of a bigger democratic crisis, whereby, in many cases, silence is used in place of dissent. By doing this, Rich Like Us is a historical piece and also a moral question about whether it is worth being politically complicit.

The historical and ideological centre of the novel is the Emergency period (1975-77) which was proclaimed

by the then Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi. This was the time of the suppression of civil rights and freedoms, large-scale arrest of political view-outsiders, and the suppression of democratic dialogues. The novel by Sahgal is a dramatization of this constitutional crisis which is not done via blatant political action but rather through the effects it has on people within the system that comprise civil servants, businessmen, housewives, and political actors. The representation of an ideal bureaucrat as an Indian civil servant who is educated in Oxford, Sonali, is devoted to the constitutional ideals in a rational and secular sense. However, her growing peripheralization is indicative of the perversion of the institutions which she takes service. The situation of Sonali who is ousted by less qualified yet politically aligned employees is the instance of devaluing merit and integrity in a differentiation by an autocratic government. Her alienation is metaphorical of the demise of democratic idealism in politics of opportunism.

When Sonali tells the story of the internal dysfunction of democracy within the bureaucracy, the story of Rose, in its turn, offers more personalized account on the democratic dysfunction. Rose, a British married to an Indian businessman is an outsider in the postcolonial Indian society. The patriarchal and cultural limitations are forever foaming her efforts to be part of love, to be involved, to get to know. Rose is more vulnerable in the Emergency when she is deprived of any legal and social status, and then has no rights against any institutional and family exploitations. Her marginalization points to the failure of democracy among individuals who live on its periphery foreigners, women and the socially unprotected. Where Sonali challenges the state by insider means, Rose challenges it in the most personal means in her family and marriage. The two women are very different in their background, but they are brought together by their helplessness facing an order of crumbling democracies. Their overlapping stories enable Sahgal to demonstrate the politicization of the personal, and the permeation of authoritarianism through all the strata of human life.

Rose happens to be a victim of both political and family politics. She is considered as having tenuous legal status and her voice is ignored. Her unfortunate fate of being murdered by Dev, her adoptive son, and his conspiracy with the scheming government agencies, is the final breaking down of the voice of the silent person in the environment of unrestricted authority. Sahgal uses Rose to demonstrate that even a political can fall a victim of political oppression. Both Rose and Sonali contain some form of resistance even though it is subtle and ineffective. The fact that Sonali refuses to support illegal acts and silently leaves a system that has turned corrupted is an expression of a dissent, which is entirely principled but alone.

They are no longer activists, like the obvious revolutionaries; the main characters in Sahgal are ordinary people who had to start dealing with the fact that values that they held as being fundamental to the nation have faded. The protest that occurred in Rich Like Us is one that is characterized by individual rather than group integrity. This itself will turn out to be a reflection on the failures of the democratic experiment in India that those who remain at an attachment to democratic values are ever more isolated, having no institutional or societal backup. The language operation of power and its oppression is another theme in the novel too. Censorship and propaganda altered the discourse of the population during the Emergency.

The result of the silence in Rich Like Us and speech demonstrates the unfair working of power in the society. Rose remains silent as, both in court and in society, she is being overlooked by people and even Dev are able to simply bend the truth to his own advantage and more. Sonali attempts to make her voice heard with her thoughts about justice and the past, yet no real change is in sight anyway. The silence of Rose is used to emphasize the role of gender and identity in rendering an individual invisible and even the role of Sonali in the government is used to demonstrate how even someone in the system can hardly do anything to change it. Ultimately, the novel demonstrates that silence may remain as a survival strategy as well as indicate the process of silencing democracy. Sahgal makes use of such silences to demonstrate how fear and repression influence the decision of people in an undemocratic society. Their struggles reveal that the characters are the losers of the voice and agency in society during the Emergency. The novel educates on the ease with which democratic values can be compromised in case of unpalinable power.

II. CONCLUSION

Rich Like Us doesn't just critique politics it tells the story of how ordinary people live through extraordinary times. Sahgal reminds us that democracy isn't just about laws or elections; it's about everyday choices, small acts of courage, and the quiet ways people push back when something feels wrong. Through Sonali and Rose, we see how power reaches into private lives, forcing people to decide what they're willing to stand for or give up. The novel doesn't offer easy answers, but it makes one thing clear: staying silent has a cost. And sometimes, simply holding on to your principles is a powerful act of resistance. The novel challenges readers to reflect on their own roles within systems of power, urging vigilance, moral clarity, and the courage to dissent. By intertwining the political with the personal, Sahgal reaffirms that the health of a democracy is measured not only by its institutions but by the resilience and conscience of its citizens. Ultimately, the novel stands as both a critique and a call to action, warning that the erosion of freedom often begins in silence.

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