

Search for Individuality in Nayantara Sahgal's *Rich Like Us*

Dr. Shalini Sharma

Associate Professor, P.G Department of English, GGM Science College, Cluster University of Jammu (CLUJ).

Abstract: The novel *Rich Like Us* won Sinclair Prize and Sahitya Academy Award for Nayantara Sahgal. The setting of the novel is New Delhi, one month after the declaration of emergency by Madam Indira Gandhi. The novel opens into a room with total anonymity where there are many people flitting and discussing emergency as boon for their illegal entrepreneurship. The nameless host continues effusively before his foreign guest that there is no opposition to their planning and business as power is centered around bureaucrats. The novel dedicated to the Indo-British experience is a retrieval and a restatement of India's past. Set in a period during emergency the novel reflects the struggle of India in the play of power through two women characters Rose, a cockney memsahib and Sonali, a western educated, liberated and independent IAS officer, though both are new women aware of their social and cultural milieu. They suffer oppression in the male chauvinistic world. The marginalized condition of women is depicted through the characters of Rose, Mona and Sonali who are sidelined in the game of power. The present paper attempts to examine women's delineation into the definition of a New Woman who is conscious of her essence and existence and makes her presence felt.

Keywords: Self, liberation, power, marginalize, aware

Date of Submission: 15-08-2026

Date of acceptance: 31-08-2026

I. Introduction

Emancipation of woman and her search for individuality are among the much-discussed questions of the day. The celebrations such as 'International Women's Day' and 'Women Empowerment Year' have, undoubtedly, directed the attention of people towards the questions like woman's liberation and her quest for identity. However, there is much to say about the concept of 'New Woman'. A large number of people in India try to identify the new Indian women with their European counterparts; while the concept of new Indian women is slightly different from the one put forth by the champions of the feminist movement in England. Ellen E. Jordan opines, "The English feminists endowed the new woman with her hostility to men, her questioning of marriage, her determination to escape from the restrictions of home life and her belief that education could make a woman capable of leading a financially self-sufficient, single and yet fulfilling life" (19).

In Indian society, too, the term 'New Woman' signifies the awakening of woman into a new realization of her place and position in family and society. Conscious of her individuality, the new Indian woman tries to assert her rights as a human being to have her status equal to man in society. She struggles to be financially independent and intellectually strong enough to break the fetters of age-old submission and mute-suffering. However, the majority of new women in India do not discard and defy the concept of marriage and home. Nor do they seem to have any hostility to men. Nayantara Sahgal's concept of new Indian woman totally differs from that of British feminists. Her women characters seek fulfilment and self-expression within marriage but if it is not possible, they step out of their conjugal world to lead a free existence. She emphasizes the need of a new morality and a new social set-up in which a woman is treated as equal to man and the relationship between the two gets strengthened by mutual trust, love and understanding. While gaining new ideological experiences Nayantara could not remain unaffected with the problem of the emancipation of women. As a champion of the cause of the individual, she shows a special concern for women with throbbing pulse, yearning for love and recognition, longing for self-expression and individual fulfilment. Here, too, Nayantara appears to be a follower of Gandhiji who believed that political freedom would be meaningless as long as women continue to be treated as weaker sex. "To call woman the weaker sex is a libel," in the view of Gandhiji, "it is man's injustice to woman. If by strength is meant brute strength, then indeed is woman less brute than man. If by strength is meant moral power, then woman is immeasurably man's superior" (Qtd. by Kriplani 395). Mrs. Sahgal strictly favours an egalitarian society where both political and social inequality and repression must be abolished,

In such a social set up women are to be treated as individuals, having their separate identity instead of being recognised as someone's wife, daughter, sister or mother. To be worthwhile, the participation of women in diverse walks of life must be on the basis of their own individuality and not as labeled possessions" (Sahgal, The Indian Express).

Placed in a patriarchal set up Mrs. Sahgal's women crave for being treated as equals and individuals.

II. Discussion

The novel *Rich Like Us* won Sinclair Prize and Sahitya Academy Award for Nayantara Sahgal. The setting of the novel is New Delhi, one month after the declaration of emergency by Madam Indira Gandhi. The novel opens into a room with total anonymity where there are many people flitting and discussing emergency as boon for their illegal entrepreneurship. The nameless host continues effusively before his foreign guest that there is no opposition to their planning and business as power is centered around bureaucrats. The novel dedicated to the Indo-British experience is a retrieval and a restatement of India's past. Set in a period during emergency the novel reflects the struggle of India in the play of power through two women characters Rose, a cockney memsahib and Sonali, a western educated, liberated and independent IAS officer, though both are new women aware of their social and cultural milieu. Sonali is bold and self assertive "a fine Indian specimen of the new woman" (Choubey 37). However both women suffer oppression in the male chauvinistic world. The marginalized condition of women is depicted through the characters of Rose, Mona and Sonali who are sidelined in the game of power. It is felt that marriage brings subjugation of a woman rendering her mere a doll in the hands of men. The story of Rose, an English woman, reflects that wherever the women are, whether in the East or the West women suffer oppression in the male dominated social set-up. Rose a poor girl who works as a salesgirl is seduced by an Englishman towards Ram, Rose finds herself in a difficult situation when Ram tells her about his first wife and his new born son. Bound with the strong feelings of love for Ram, Rose willingly leaves her country and parents and comes to India with Ram. In India she feels alienated in a foreign culture and in the house which neither welcomes her nor needs her. In India she feels herself wronged; she finds :

Herself in a sari she could hardly keep on, her legs cramped under her pins and needles torturing her feet, the fire into which the priest stopped his nasal chanting to throw bits of this and that stinging her face, her ears filled with foreign talk she couldn't understand, and finally, when she was almost hysterical with fatigue, wifehood (Sahgal 44).

Feeling utter distress at her pitiable condition, she could have asked Ram to book her a passage back to England but she didn't want to go home and finally accepted her marriage to Ram for better or for worse (65). She experiences hostility in the eyes of Mona, Ram's first wife. The feeling of hostility is natural to all women. No wife can bear the presence of other woman in her home and life. Rose was an intruder, an usurper in Mona's home. She feels that Rose has taken her husband away from her. And a cold war goes between Rose and Mona. Rose could understand it as: "a natural enough reaction to an intruder, a usurper" (62). Ram believes in old Indian values of joint family system and makes Rose and Mona live in the same house though Rose lives on the upper floor and Mona on the ground floor. Rose feels deep anguish when Ram goes to Mona during night to console her. While watching Dev playing, Rose gets filled with mixed feeling of anger, pain and jealousy as she herself could not perform the service of motherhood. She ponders that :

Without a child of her own, Rose would never be mistress of the house, not even her half of it. She would pass through this family, this frightening, unshakable permanence, leaving nor the shadowiest imprint of her own on it. She was less than mist. There wouldn't be a trace left of her dreams or her nightmares, no one to regret her going, not a tear to mark her passage, while Mona's son grew and Mona's war trickled down to become a Hindu-Muslim riot in the kitchen where the Muslim cook for English food and Hindu cook for Indian food became embattled belligerents over wood and coal, oil, rice, tea, sugar and chains of command (76).

The war between Rose and Mona is the reflection of India's trouble and turmoil that India went through during Quit India Movement and Partition. Mona a victim of bigamy feels wretched and could not bear the sight of Rose in her home. She tries to burn herself under the pretext of doing her puja. Luckily she is saved by Rose and a bond of friendship developed between the two and normalcy is restored. Mona now confides every thing with Rose. She consults Rose in her search for a suitable girl for her son Dev. While dying of cancer she asks Rose to take care of her son and daughter-in-law. Rose again finds herself sidelined and isolated when Ram leaves her and falls in love with another woman Marcella. She spends sleepless night thinking that women are destined to suffer in the hands of men. She bears this suffering and pain almost for five years and realizes that it is the kind of justice for the wrong she has done to Mona. It is only when Ram falls ill and paralyzed and Rose sits beside him, mute staring at Ram's face, she is shocked to find that Ram's son Dev is forging Ram's money. Ram has done no planning for the future of Rose. She discusses this problem with Sonali with whom she shares her mental and emotional space. But before Sonali could do something Rose is murdered and her body is dumped into the well. This is the plight of Rose. She is sacrificed on the altar of power and pelf. Sonali, an educated and liberated woman, faces the burnt of demotion when ordered to serve at a lower rank in her state. She is replaced by Ravi Kachru who was her childhood friend. Both are foreign educated and illuminated persons having different perspectives about life. The polarities of their views are reflected in the way they react to the existing power keeping all the controversies at bay, Sonali rejects the proposal for the setting up of cold drink factory and displeases the higher authorities. She has imbibed Gandhian values of non-violence from her

father. She was pained to see the young boy who was beaten by police and was struggling to pick his spectacles from the ground. She wanted to keep herself away from such horrible sights and wanted to be confined in her car. She refused to be a party to crime and rejected the proposal for the plant of Happyola aerated drink. And thus put her job in jeopardy. She was demoted and ordered to serve at lower rank. But she refused. When she hears about Rose's death she is full of rage as she knew that Rose could not commit suicide. It was a plain murder. Sonali gradually now comes to terms with "the wilderness of loss that included Rose." At her father's house Sonali goes through the records of her grandfather's diary dated 1915 which narrates the ghastly incident of Suttee and how her own grandmother suffered the pangs of burning in the hands of her relatives. She was driven forcibly by her husband's relatives to the funeral fire only for power and pelf. She also comes across the narrative how her grandfather fought bravely with his relatives to avert the situation to bring her mother out of the fire but in vain. She now realizes that there are illuminated and aware people in all the time and ages and "Not all of us are passive before cruelty and depravity" (171). At Ravi's confession that he still loves her she feels much relieved. She is offered the job of a research scientist by Rose's friend to capture the picture of mid-seventeenth and mid-eighteenth century India. "Immersed in the past, I was preparing all the while for the future—Though it was really Rose's legacy again, the paths that have crossed hers now crossing mine, reminding me I was young and alive, with my own century stretched out before me, determination as a proud citizen of free India who feels proud to be an Indian. As an intellectual she is concerned with the preservation of human rights and her country's future. "For me this was the world's most interesting country with life's biggest challenges to be met" (193).

Besides, Rose and Sonali there are other women characters who play an important role. Nishi, Dev's wife, is a stereotype Indian woman whose sole purpose in life is to follow her husband. She is always at the beck and call of her husband. "Yes Devi kin and no Devikins. She rejects the ground realities and becomes a company to her husband's corrupt means of gaining power and position."

Coming from a lower-middle class socio-economic background where she saw her mother overburdened with too many children, Nishi apparently opted for the order created by riches. She believes in the superfluity of materialism and addresses meeting in the five stars hotel discussing the agenda for vasectomizing the masses amidst tea parties. Unlike Sonali she ignores the ground realities and drags even the old and the cripple people for vasectomy. It is only through Rose's intervention that her frenzied action of driving people into the Biscuit factory van is brought under control. Born in a poor family she views life from her own angle. Unlike Sonali she is not concerned about her individual self. She believes that money is the only thing to live a decent life. When her husband Dev showed disrespect to his father she kept silent. She lives two lives. She is divided self who knows the need of woman but before her husband she is a mere puppet following his orders. "Grappling with her selves was simple if she kept her inner and outer selves apart. Pulling them together showed her the world as it was, and her single will, defiant, disobedient and distraught confronted it" (264).

As a feminist discourse, Sahgal's novels show the dilemma its women characters face at various points in their life. Rose's coming to India and getting married to Ram shows that it was her individual act of choice. Had Rose been mature enough to understand the status of a second wife that too in an alien culture she wouldn't have taken this drastic step. She suffers due to nonchalant attitude of Ram. Ram tells Rose about the Krishna who had three hundred wives justifying bigamy. Then he tells her about Draupadi who shared five people as her husband. Both the women Rose and Mona suffer due to Ram's bigamous relationship. They underwent deep mental agony.

Ram proves himself a carefree type person, it was Rose's fault who married him. In spite of knowing the fact that he was already married and had a wife and a child she made conjugal bond. Thus Rose herself is responsible for her plight. Later Rose was murdered by her stepson Dev and her body was dumped into the well. Only a cripple beggar was a witness of Rose's murder. Mona suffers due to Rose's insensible action and accepts Rose as Ram's second wife. Still she was the mistress of the house with full authority to rule the house and the servant. Nishi deliberately misinterprets Rose's death, claiming that she could not bear Ram's illness and lost interest in life. Rose's, life was scarified just for the sake of money and power. Sonali had always shared her emotional conflict with Rose. She always turned to Rose for sympathy and support whenever she found herself in distress. Both Rose and Sonali despised materialism, keeping alive channels of honest communication and concern for the suffering of downtrodden. Rose hands over her legacy-humanitarian and optimistic to Sonali, making non-existence the cultural divide. Sonali enters in a close relationship with Ravi, her childhood friend. Later on when she finds Ravi's strong indication towards Marxism and his belief in materialistic world she moves away from him. Ravi instead of understanding Sonali leaves her. He sacrifices his relationship to attain power and position. He rides higher and higher along the crest of emergency joining true bureaucrats. Thus relationship is sacrificed at the altar of money and power in a materialistic world. Nayantara Sahgal uses the image, "bounding out like an alsatian" for Ravi. Like a true professional he addresses public meeting emphasizing the values of emergency and nationalization of the banks. He becomes a party to wrong and corrupt practices and gets indulged in the game of power to fulfill his selfish motives.

The novel *Rich Like Us* dedicated to Indo-British experiences brings home the fact that whatever may be the place, culture or race women are always subjugated and rendered powerless in the male-supremacist world. Rose, Sonali, Mona and Nishi-all four women suffered in their lives. They are always considered inferior and sidelined from the hub of society. Their views and ideas are not given due importance and are rejected as base and mean. But it is noticed that at times woman herself is held responsible for her inferior status accepting the secondary position. Women will have to emerge out of the stereotyped image and have to struggle for their freedom. Instead of seeking male's approval for their work they should assert themselves before men and prove their individuality. Through the episode of Sati the novel presents the ghastly picture of atrocities and crudities inflicted on women in the past. These cruel practices still continue even after the 60 years of independence. Dowry deaths are modern version of Sati. Women are burnt alive by their in-laws because of their greed for money.

Breakup of marriages and decaying of moral values present the true picture of modern India where corruption, crime and greed are rampant. The game of power from Mr. Gandhi to Ms. Gandhi has turned the message of justice, truth and nonviolence into decadence. True, the novel offers hope, confidence and affirmation. Rose's assurance to provide artificial limbs to cripple, Ravi's turning towards Sonali, Sonali's appointment as a researcher by Rose's friend show that better situation will soon prevail and the dark forces of power will disappear and new light of hope will emerge to illuminate the mind and to enlighten men and women. Through Rose and Sonali, Nayantara Sahgal has presented the new woman who is urban, educated and professional. Such a woman is self-respecting, dignified and capable to handle critical situation without any assistance from men. She can fashion her life in her style without making any compromise. Nayantara Sahgal has sought the transformation and reformation of Indian society through the freedom of women.

III. Conclusion

Stepping out of their suffocating world of domestic disharmony, Nayantara's women move towards a state of self dependence and individual freedom. However, her woman doesn't cross the edge of her household to be a sojourner. There is always another male protagonist to support and strengthen her faith in herself. Mrs. Sahgal's attempt, therefore, is not to create a manless world where women live alone to enjoy their identity and individuality. She, rather, seems to suggest that marriage should be made with the 'right ingredients'. She had learnt from her own experience that an unwise selection of the lifemate results in discord and disharmony as is the case with most of her heroines who, finally, succeed to win the right man with whom they can communicate and make healthy relations based on understanding and co-operation. Thus Mrs. Sahgal is not in the favour of the extremities of the Western feminist movement. She has no respect for the theories like Greer's "women must refuse to marry" (Qtd. by Srinivasan 1) and never supports such formations of sexual liberations as 'Lesbian feminism' (Qtd. by Srinivasan 10). She is, rather, against a male-centred world which arms men with undue superiority and patriarchal power. Hence, the battle, in her novels, is not between men and women. "It is a battle between those who believe in an equal society and those who don't" (Interviewed by Mohini 64-65). Mrs. Sahgal's ideal is the 'Ardhangini' concept which is borrowed from the Indian traditional past and according to which man and woman or husband and wife are the equal partners in the physical and metaphysical pursuits of human life. That the novels of Mrs. Sahgal don't confine to the women-centred world is evident from the fact that her male protagonists have roles as important as those of female characters in every novel.

Works Cited

- [1]. Choubey, Asha. *The Fictional Milieu of Nayantara Sahgal's Fiction, A Feminist Perspective*. New Delhi: Classical Pub., 2002.
- [2]. Jordan, Ellen E. *The Christening of New Woman*. The Victorian Newsletter. Spring, 1983.
- [3]. Kriplani, J.B. *Gandhi: His Life and Thought*. New Delhi: Publication Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Govt. of India, Patiala House, 1970.
- [4]. Sahgal, Nayantara. *Rich Like Us*. 1985 rpt. New Delhi: Harper Collins Publisher, 2003.
- [5]. Sahgal, Nayantara. *Women's Liberation-The Indian Way?* The Indian Express, March 21, 1971.
- [6]. Srinivasan, Seetha. *In Search of an Identity*. The Hindu Magazine. 25 August, 1991.
- [7]. *Writers at Work*. Interviewed by V. Mohini. The Literary Criterion, Vol. XXV, No. 1, 1990.