

**QUESTION OF FEMININITY REVIEWED IN NAYANTARA SAHGAL'S
*RICH LIKE US***

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Abstract

Definition of femininity has always changed with time. Things which were taken as the epitomes of femininity has naturally undergone changes. It is in this context that the idea of femininity has been observed to be reviewed by Nayantara Sahgal in many of her writings and novels. This particular novel *Rich Like Us* (1985) has been analyzed specifically under this light in this particular paper. The novel brilliantly shows the two different levels of femininity depicted by the two major female characters. One of the character is a reflection of voiceless patience and tolerance only with fits of eccentric expression while the other woman who seems to be greatly liberated and an advanced version of femininity is actually only a better form of the same toleration, patience, exploitation and sufferance. Both the women meet an early death out of either be it an arranged one or be it an outcome of love. However, Sahgal has successfully been able to depict the struggle for existence at different levels of these two women upkeeping their own feministic identities in their individual lives.

Keywords: *Femininity, domination, patience, tolerance, exploitation, sufferance*

Introduction: The background of the author

Rich Like Us (1985) is Nayantara Sahgal's Sahitya Academy Award winning novel which intermingles politics with feminism. In *Authors Speak* (2006) the editor K. Satchidanandan, while introducing Nayantara Sahgal, opines about this novel, "The Sahitya Academy Award winning novel *Rich Like Us* has emergency for its backdrop and projects the failures, frustrations and exploitation of women – a faithful wife, a middle-aged unmarried civil servant or a cockney English woman. There is a blend of the two worlds here, the public and the private" (Satchidanandan, 2006).

But this paper aims at foiling the weak and the oppressed to the strong and yet deprived woman. In fact, *Rich Like Us* (1985) is a saga of the protest of women against men who wittily or overtly inflict torture on the "less privileged" class. In this novel, a protest has been raised and that is it. Only the strong yet deprived woman, Sonali, proves to be worthy to come out in the open to

prove her mettle and change the course of her life as and when she was chunked out of her prestigious job of an administrator.

Rich Like Us: A detailed analysis

The psychology of the two kinds of women is diagonally opposite. Mona, Ram's first wife was a timid, god-fearing, ritual-observing woman who had no voice to protest against Ram's decision to marry a second time. She was only mopping alone in the dark, wasting herself away. But why are the Indian women so devoid of courage to rise to the occasion and proclaim their own rights? Why so! It is because of their age-old mind set, their inability to come out of a secured, ensconced existence supported by comfort of amenities to protest against something, their lack of courage to take risks in their strides. Mona's depression, her inability to satisfy Ram was eating into her entrails, yet she stuck to her family, she shrieked, broke into violent sobs, but dared not walk out of her husband! This 'sense of insecurity' coupled with neurotic need for love drove her insane! For the latter, she even followed rituals, said regular prayers to win her husband's heart! Despite the second wife Rose's entrance into her household, in spite of Ram's neglect towards her she kept on praying for Ram's well-being. Nayantara Sahgal in clear terms mentioned, "She and Mona, Ram's first wife lived on different floors, but, the sounds how the sounds carried! The first one, Rose remembers, was the elaborate prayer chanted in thanksgiving by Mona's priest for Ram's safe return...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." (Sahgal, 1985)

Marriage as Destiny

The fate of the married woman of Nayantara Sahgal's novel is deplorable. Neither Mona nor Rose is happy, secured, assertive. Both seemed to get assailed by the element of 'insecurity'. Ram, a fancy items-shop owner of Delhi might have fallen in love with Mona, could have a nice problem-free family with a son like Dev. But why did he take a second wife, that too from a community which had just left the country ruling us for more than twenty decades? A million-dollar question, no doubt. But at the same time, Mona's taciturnity to our chagrin is fruitless as it fails to protest against Ram's insensible decision though in her heart of hearts she suffers. Mona kept herself engrossed in meaningless rituals, sometimes indulged in mean home-politics with the help of the servants, only to keep herself happy about the fact that she was the chief mistress of the house. Nayantara Sahgal too justifies the idea with the lines, "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 she might be in it"(Sahgal, 1985).

There is not an iota of doubt that Mona had deep love and respect for her husband. Then, why did she keep dumb about his marrying Rose even when she had been there beside all along to share his joy, grief, rather all his feelings? This question assails the reader off and on and they are left with a dismal point to ponder over and that is, women had been dependent on men for their survival at that time. Liberty for women had been a distant dream. But from Mona to Rose to Sonali it is a methodical graph for the uplift of women. Let us consider the cases separately. Mona, being a petite pretty wife of Ram, the mother of Dev, could easily lead a blessed existence. And Ram was quite an outspoken, smart guy who could easily support his family lavishly without creating any further complications like wooing a British damsel Rose and bring her into his family as his 'honoured' second wife. But it could not be stalled any way. And it is widely understood that Mona could never accept the presence of a British lady who was actually

brought to share the same bed with her husband. At first Mona feels that her presence as well as position in the family stand jeopardized. Her protests are mute, gagged, somewhat arbitrary. Of course, it was none of Rose's fault. They were having occasional flings while Ram broke the proposal to her! And that too, when he came to learn that Mona had given birth to Dev just a month back. Rose exclaimed, "How can you get married when you are married?" (Sahgal, 1985) Initially Rose's parents too disapproved of this awkward alliance. Even Rose's mother expressed her concern, "Ow can you marry a man that's married? E's going to throw you out when he gets tired of you...And wot's going to protect you out there?" (Sahgal, 1985) Rose too was bamboozled by her own decision. "Rose was as distraught as her mother, as baffled as her father and she couldn't explain what she was doing..." (Sahgal, 1985) Rose came to Ram's household and found to her utter dismay that Mona was reluctant to accept her. Was it quite unbecoming of an Indian wife who kept fasting and saying prayers regularly for the wellbeing of her husband? Was it unbecoming of a young, devoted, Indian wife to expect full attention of her husband when she has given birth to a child lately? Being of an alien origin, Rose tried to keep herself busy in partying, socializing, hobnobbing with smart intelligent girls like Sonali.

But even then, Rose began to feel suffocated in the ambience, where Mona and her new born child stayed. In her heart of hearts, she even nursed a derogatory thought, "One of Rose's more foolish fancies had been that everything would work out alright if Mona were dead. If only she would be dead, dead, dead...Mona was only two years older than herself, she wouldn't die for years. The three of them would live and die together, the 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." (Sahgal, 1985)

Once Mona was about to die being consumed by flames and it luckily caught Rose's attention and Rose saved her. Was it her magnanimity or otherwise? Or was it just a natural action of a human being on seeing the other one dying precariously? She, who wished Mona would die, saved her! Nayantara Sahgal writes, "Mona kept her prayer accessories on a low table. One brass oil-lamp well-lit was on it. Its pair had fallen over near the wall paneling behind the table and could have started the fire without her realizing it. And then Rose saw her grievous mistake. 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 childbirth, her short agonizing gasps barely audible. Rose dragged the cover off her bed and with Kumar's help wrapped it round Mona's struggling body and got her out of the room... Mona's neck and left arm were a gruesome sight... (Sahgal, 1985). Rose saved Mona, who she wanted to die! Again, when Ram thanked and certified her as a 'good woman' Rose in her heart of hearts wanted to say how she hated her, how she longed for her death! Then why did she rush to save her? Rose reasoned to herself, "If there's a fire, you jump in and rescue a person if you can, that's all" (Sahgal, 1985).

Fate of Mona

Mona recovered, came closer to Rose-ji, opened her heart out to her regarding the wedding-plans of Dev, yet, the hiatus between them had not been totally effaced. But what about the feminine instincts or the female sentiments then? The final decision regarding Dev's marriage was to be taken by Mona as she happened to be the mother of Dev. When Rose-ji inquired of any problem regarding caste it was Mona who came up with a pat rejoinder, "And caste is not so strict nowadays, we should be more broadminded except for untouchables" (Sahgal, 1985). And lastly, Mona found the right match (according to her choice) for Dev. Her answer was, "...it is a

respectable family, the same caste as us and the girl, though not the right height, is chiseled and snow-fair” (Sahgal, 1985). Mona did not survive till Dev’s wedding in that winter. Before the winter came, she was consumed by insidious cancer. Before her death she implored Rose however, “Our daughter-in-law...you will have after her, wont you Rose-ji?” (Sahgal, 1985). The very statement shades much light upon the mental frame of an Indian woman. Mona could hardly keep her at arm’s length. Hence, her imploring to Rose-ji. Mona’s demise was inevitable though pathetic. A woman suffering for the ill-fated presence of another woman just for satiating her husband’s desire.

So long we have seen how Mona sacrificed her life at the altar of mute humiliation of her femininity. Now we are to judge Rose’s case who was English (second) wife of Ram. Unlike Anita Desai, Nayantara Sahgal focuses on women and value structures, while the former highlights individual consciousness. Rose enjoyed certain liberties in the household of Ram as his second wife. But she was not happy at all with the lascivious nature of her husband. Ram, however, used to stay with her leaving Mona (first wife) alone in another floor of the same house. Yet, Rose could never be happy. Her rights had never been established fully. This is so far Rose was attached to and enamored of Ram. But as a natural course life would have taken, Dev became resentful of Rose. In the meanwhile, the declaration of Emergency “had given Dev a bullying power and confidence he would never have” (Sahgal, 1985). It was because his father Ram had catapulted to a “VIP close to the throne” (Sahgal, 1985). It is really annoying to think that news of Dev’s birth had been cabled to England to Ram when Rose was just going to get wedded to him. And after his mother’s death, though he behaved courteously with Rose, sometimes behind close doors she heard him say, ‘She was my father’s keep’ or ‘Why shouldn’t I control her account?’ or ‘She nearly killed my mother’ or ‘She lorded it over the house, bossed the show when it was my mother’s house...’ (Sahgal, 1985). Again, Rose sometimes did not want to believe them as spoken by Dev. She sometimes consoled herself by thinking that “she was listening to a voice in herself” (Sahgal, 1985).

Fate of Rose

Rose faced an ill-fated, gruesome death. Rose’s body was found in a well within a couple of days after Diwali. Dev and others surmised it to be suicide followed by over-boozing. But her friend Sonali knew “how steady Rose was on her feet when she had had a drink or two, taking care to put her feet heavily on the ground in a slow, measured way” (Sahgal, 1985). Then how did she die? Was it not a heinous scheming by Dev, the newly appointed Cabinet Minister? Ram’s demise had shoved her to dumps. But Sonali could make out that it was “a murder protected by the ramparts of the political power put it much further beyond the reach of justice” (Sahgal, 1985). Such then was Rose’s fate – miserable, duped, cruel. Is Monique Wittig wrong in saying, “What is woman? Panic, general alarm for an active defense” (Wittig, 1980).

In *Rich Like Us* (1985), the question of domination and oppression of woman by man has been raised pertinently. Jana Sawicki in her essay ‘Foucault, Feminism and Question of Identity’ opines, “Feminists must continue to address the personal costs of patriarchal domination through attention to developing empowering practices of self-creation, while at the same time avoiding the tendency to reduce politics to personal transformation...” (Sawicki, 1994). As Adrienne Rich points out, “Breaking the silences, telling our tales is not enough. We can value the process – and the courage it may require – without believing that it is an end in itself” (Gutting, 1994). Thus, the deplorable fates of both Mona and Rose are not end in themselves. We have to find a way out to rescue femininity out of the shackles of ignominy and debased domination.

No doubt, Nayantara Sahgal portrays Sonali as a strong woman as a foil to Mona and Rose. Sonali is a civil servant who stood first in the competitive examination and again who has been ruthlessly chucked out of her job. Sonali is the only woman in the novel who has the courage to say no to a love-offer which had already gone sour. While Ravi Kachru offered her a chance to bury the hatchet, Sonali had the guts to feel, “It wasn’t mine any more to remake. And I was free of it. Most of all I was free” (Sahgal, 1985). The joy of freedom is the essence of femininity, of womanhood, by and large. Marcella and Brian came to her rescue and pulled her out of the overbearing boredom that lay so heavily on her gradually. When they asked of opening an art-gallery on the History of India and expressed their intention of roping in Sonali, she exclaimed, “I have no training in art. I was a civil servant until I was thrown out. Soon after the Emergency began, I am no use at anything else” (Sahgal, 1985). It was Marcella who prescribed, “It’s much too soon to decide that...When a career ends one should try one’s hand on another... In your case, you are so young you could take off in any direction you like” (Sahgal, 1985).

And Sonali gets engrossed into it, joins hands with Marcella and Brian to cure herself of the frustration that had already kept eating into her entrails! A befitting answer to the lives of Rose and Mona wasted away on the altar of marriage, devotion to husband so forth. Sonali is a new woman enlightened, empowered, liberated in a way of course!

Conclusion

It was a time in the initial years of birth of Modernism that Virginia Woolf in her *A Room of One’s Own* wrote that ‘A woman needs enough money and a room of her own to call herself independent’ (Woolf, 1996). Much later, Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak in her *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Towards a History of the Vanishing Present* says that a widow of the early nineteenth century Bengal had committed suicide in order to ward off a false slur heaped on her. As she died and signs of her menstrual blood were seen on her, the scandalmongers beat a retreat (Spivak, 1999). Again, in Europe a protest for women’s suffrage was another milestone for proving that the battle of Feminism was there and still is on. If that be not the case of Mary Wollstonecraft and Anna Laetitia Barbauld or Emily Dickinson should cry themselves hoarse against the discrimination, women often fall prey to!

Initially, the feminists protested against the rights of women being denied. Simone de Beauvoir in her *The Second Sex* (1997) too raised the issue of the rights of woman, who is generally looked down upon as a creature inferior to man, born to dance to his tune, play a second fiddle to him (Beauvoir, 1997). Later on, the fundamental rights got ramified into so many other offshoots that the women felt proud of standing tall among throngs of men! As Virginia Woolf preached through Lily Briscoe, the independent painter in *To the Lighthouse* (1997), that, earnings of one’s own identified him as a capable individual especially if she is a woman as men are always deemed capable (Woolf, 1997). In *A Room of One’s Own* (1996), Mrs. Woolf tells the story of Aphra Behn who a middle-class woman with limited sense of humour was, vitality and courage. But, after her husband’s demise, she took to writing and in her acclaimed works like “A thousand martyrs I have made”, or “Love in fantastic triumph sat” she gave rein to the freedom of her mind and made her own living with it (Woolf, 1996). Says Woolf, “For now that Aphra Behn had done it, girls could go to their parents and say, you need not give me an allowance; I can make money by my pen.” However, they had to tolerate innuendoes like ‘Yes, by living the life of Aphra Behn! Death would be better!!’ (Woolf, 1996). Self-respect of women simply went

unacknowledged. But in Nayantara Sahgal's *Rich Like Us* (1985), Sonali has tried to prove the otherwise adding a positive direction to it.

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