

Victimization of Women in Nayantara Sahgal's *Rich Like Us*

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Abstract

The victimization of Indian women has remained a significant social concern shaped by historical, cultural, economic and patriarchal structures. Despite progress in education, employment, social and legal reforms, women continue to experience various forms of oppression, including domestic violence, gender discrimination, social exclusion, economic dependency and political marginalization. This research paper examines the different dimensions of women's victimization in Indian society and explores the socio-political forces that sustain inequality. It also highlights women's resistance, changing identities and their growing role in challenging traditional norms. Through literary and social perspectives, the study aims to understand the condition of Indian women and the ongoing struggle for dignity, equality and empowerment. It also explores the victimization of Indian women in Nayantara Sahgal's *Rich Like Us* (1985) by examining the socio-political and patriarchal structures that shape women's lives. The novel presents the experiences of women characters who encounter gender discrimination, emotional suppression, social restrictions and unequal power relations within Indian society. It not only portrays women's victimization but also emphasizes their resilience amid political and social challenges.

Keywords: India, Women, Victimization, Emergency, Patriarchy

Introduction

Throughout history women have consistently been the victims of society's ideals. Victimization of women in India is deeply rooted in patriarchal traditions, social customs, religious interpretations and economic dependence that developed over centuries. They have to follow certain rules and standards that have been set. As a consequence, they are anticipated to live according to the societal norms, which limits their opportunities and diminishes their importance in the society. Women have endured the constraints of subjugation for ages, hindering their ability to achieve both professional and personal success. They have faced a life of oppression, exploitation and victimization under the guise of societal, political and cultural constraints. Patriarchy made it hard for Indian women to have their own identities and be recognised for their skills and uniqueness. They have been obligated to uphold the custom of tolerance, fortitude and perseverance. In addition to social, cultural, economic and political exploitation, they were subjected to a variety of forms of exploitation which includes humiliation, insults, emotional abuse and control over speech and behaviour.

During the British rule in India, the women's history can be described as sluggish yet progressive and reformist in reaching towards modernity. The history of India is seen to be a blend of western ideas as well as their liberal outlook and genuine Indian traditions. A nation is formed by belief. It is marked by the shared sense of belonging or identity of a group and prospects for the future seeking an independent political presence. It is seen that during the 1940's and 1950's the understanding of India's history, cultural practices, mythologies, various issues and questions pertaining to what defines India and being an Indian began to take place. With the emergence of nationalism in the twentieth century, India's identity became visually identified with the Bharat Mata's image. This image encouraged people to give their lives for "her," not only as a patriotic obligation but also as a religious one. Bankim Chandra Chatterjee (1838–1894), a Bengali author and poet, penned "Bande Mataram" as a tribute to the motherland in the 1870s. Afterwards it was included in Bankim's novel *Anandamath* in 1882. The song "Vande Mataram" (Hail to thee, Mother), became incredibly symbolic in the fight to liberate the oppressed mother (Mukherjee 48). The credit for the first visual evocation of Bharatmata (Mother India)

is given to the Indian painter Rabindranath Tagore for beautifully painting *Bharatmata* in 1905. At the time when India was fighting for its independence, the image of Bharatmata served as a symbol to instill a sense of patriotism among the Indian people. Women often serve as a symbol of national honour and are idealised as nurturing mothers. It is regarded that nation is created by men in the image of women that is Bharat Mata but it is seen women are not accorded that respect, freedom and place.

Numerous efforts have been made to emancipate women. However, their circumstances did not significantly improve after India's independence. They are subjugated, suppressed, and marginalised when it comes to sharing the opportunity for their lives to be fulfilled. Indian women do not enjoy the same rights as Indian men. *Towards Equality*, a report on the status of women in India was published in 1974. It served as a wake-up call. This report indicated that women's status had not raised but had, in fact, declined since Independence:

The review of the disabilities and constraints on women, which stem from socio- cultural institutions, indicates that the majority of women are still very far from enjoying the rights and opportunities guaranteed to them by the Constitution ... The social laws, that sought to mitigate the problems of women in their family life, have remained unknown to a large mass of women in this country, who are as ignorant of their legal rights today as they were before Independence. (qtd. in Forbes 227)

The main point of the report is that millions of Indian women have not reaped the benefits of modernity whether it be economic, technological, political or social remains true even today. In spite of legal efforts and government initiatives, the disparity between ideology and reality has increased. The Indian people's subconscious is strongly influenced by traditions, faith, dogma and mythology, leading to the emergence of evil and regressive practices against women.

Nayantara Sahgal is a prominent contemporary Indian writer of English. She was born on 10 May 1927, in Allahabad, India, as the second of three daughters of Ranjit Sitaram Pandit and Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit. Politics entered the life of Sahgal very early. She spent her entire childhood in Anand Bhawan, the ancestral residence

of the Nehru family in Allahabad, where she resided with her parents, maternal uncle Jawaharlal Nehru, and her cousin Indira Gandhi. Consequently, she possesses a firsthand understanding of Indian politics and political figures. Throughout her life Sahgal has stood for freedom, justice, religious tolerance and non-violence.

Sahgal is a prolific writer who has written a plethora of works, including novels, memoirs, a collection of short stories, political commentaries, essay collections and nonfictions, all of which address contemporary national issues. On 6 October 2015, Sahgal returned the award she had been given by the Sahitya Akademi in 1986 for her novel *Rich Like Us* to protest what she called increasing intolerance and supporting right to dissent in the country, in her letter to Sahitya Akademi she said,

It is a matter of sorrow that the Sahitya Akademi remains silent. In memory of the Indians who have been murdered, in support of all Indians who uphold the right to dissent, and of all dissenters who now live in fear and uncertainty, I am returning my Sahitya Akademi Award. (Menon 369-370)

This shows that she has an unbending will to fight against injustice and oppression in the country. Sahgal uses politics and gender issues in her works. Her novels show women struggling against oppression because of the patriarchy and injustice heaped upon them in the name of tradition and culture. Nayantara Sahgal has established a distinctive position in Indian English fiction through her substantial and varied contributions, which are characterised by her sparkling wit. She has addressed a wide range of consequences associated with the ongoing struggle of women to establish their identity and space in this patriarchal society. Sahgal's novels provide a vivid depiction of the struggle of women against restrictive society and its stereotypical notions, which consistently impede their emancipation and assertion of individuality. The marginalised and colonised condition of women is quite apparent in the prejudices woven into the fabric of social norms and traditions while addressing the gender oppression and identity crises. In Sahgal's opinion, fulfilment is achieved through freedom. She represents freedom in all spheres of life, including social, religious, political, and domestic. She also endeavours to convey this idea in her novels.

Socio-political stance in Nayantara Sahgal's *Rich Like Us*

Nayantara Sahgal's novel *Rich Like Us* vividly delves into the victimization and issues faced by women. The novel exposes the struggles of women who are frequently oppressed by traditional Indian society as they pursue their sense of self. Nayantara Sahgal introduces us to the origin and development of contemporary India, elucidates the highs and lows of the world's most populous democracy and highlights its virtues and vices. The novel's narrative is set against the backdrop of the Indian socio-political ethos, which includes the economic disparities, the traditional cruelty towards women, the bitter past and the political upheavals of the Emergency (1975). The novel shows how corruption and greed on all levels lead to victimization and exploitation. It emphasises on the human dimensions of the story predominated by political interest. In an interview with Jasbir Jain in 1990, Nayantara Sahgal, has spoken:

I think of politics not as leading the country but politics as the use of power. And also the abuse of power it happens at so many levels. (Jain 186)

Rich Like Us offers the authentic picture of India under Emergency, where power becomes arbitrary and the corrupts and the opportunists flourish. The Emergency declared in the year 1975 by Indira Gandhi was a traumatic period for the country. The novel is set in New Delhi that follows the lives of two female protagonists, Rose and Sonali, and their struggle to live in a time of political turmoil and social reorganization. The novel portrays the status of women as seen in the Indian society.

Through Sonali Ranade, Sahgal illustrates the victimization of women by depicting the tortures and torments that destructive social forces impart upon her. Sonali, is projected by Nayantara to convey her emotions regarding the challenges faced by women. She stated that the development of women is essential for the advancement of any society. Sonali, a thirty-eight-year-old Indian Civil Servant, struggles to discover the truth and logic in her ever-changing homeland, India. She has received her education in the West and is an intelligent, modern, liberated and independent individual whose perspective on self-assertion is not influenced by established norms. She is the embodiment of the contemporary woman and aspires to establish a new tradition that incorporates the merits of modernity. She is closer to

her father than her mother, both ideologically and emotionally. Sonali, the daughter of civil servant Keshav Ranade, grew up with her father's admiration for Gandhi and his principles. Gandhi's unwavering commitment to concepts such as truth, integrity, simplicity, personal liberty, devotion to one's conscience, the fortitude to confront adversity, and the establishment of the right to dissent and protest was instilled in her by her father.

The novel is a fearlessly presented account of the harassment caused to all sections of people during the period of National Emergency. The Emergency is only a month old when already there is:

Sullenness building up along New Delhi's heavily policed roads, and news travelled from the old city of rioting when tenements were torn from under slum dwellers and they were packed off out of sight to distant locations. It did not need much imagination to sense the hate and fear inside the vans with iron-barred windows, like the ones used for collecting stray dogs for drowning, that now roamed the streets picking up citizens for vasectomy. (Sahgal 21-22)

The declaration of emergency resulted in the restriction of freedom in numerous ways, including the monopolisation of power, erratic arrests, arbitrary detention of individuals for forced vasectomy, suppression of all opposition and censorship. The dishonest hoarding of black money, the rampant corruption at all levels as well the wealth that was not earned honestly disclose the dark side of the emergency as a contradictory era to the democratic period. The emergency caused both large and minor tyrants. The administrative officer Sonali, who is both honest and obstinate, is one of the numerous victims. The issue she faces is how to manage the hypocrisy and corruption that have infiltrated the Indian administrative system. Sonali's life was deeply affected by the Emergency and the various twists and turns of Indian politics. She is disillusioned by the current state of affairs:

The Emergency had given all kinds of new twists and turns to policy and the world's largest democracy was looking like nothing so much as one of the two-bit dictatorships we had loftily looked down upon. (Sahgal 26)

In the wake of Emergency when she refuses to interpret rules to the advantage of political bosses, she is punished. Ravi Kachru, her old friend and former class-fellow, takes over her position as the Joint Secretary in the Ministry of Industry. The Emergency has significantly shaken Sonali's system of ideals. Her unwavering commitment to service suffers when she refuses to provide authorisation to a foreign industrialist to establish a soft drink factory. She was unaware that it was a ruse to import and store car parts necessary for the production of an indigenous car by the Prime Minister's younger son. Sonali is removed from her position as Joint Secretary at the Ministry of Industry precisely one month and one day following the declaration of Emergency. She is abruptly demoted and transferred because she refuses to interpret the law in a way that benefits political leaders. Sonali openly and fearlessly opposes the bureaucratic structure. She who is devoted, honest, and patriotic, has a terrible shock when she receives her transfer order. The bureaucratic system victimises her, rather than recognising her for fulfilling her duty with a sense of patriotism.

Ten minutes later a phone call informed me I was to go back to a posting in my State where, I already knew, and the Union government certainly knew, there was no vacancy at my level. I hadn't merely been transferred without warning, I had been demoted, punished, and humiliated, and I had no inkling why. (Sahgal 27)

Sonali is filled with resentment and frustration, as she believes that society places a higher value on those in positions of authority than on those who strive to be sincere and honest in their work. She is unable to continue working in a corrupt environment, as she feels entirely alienated and reacts with determination to avoid "grovel beg favours and act like a worm instead of a person" (Sahgal 34) when she experiences rejection. She instead courageously engages in her sole conflict as a woman and as a citizen of a liberated nation. She determines that she cannot continue to be a part of the widespread conspiracy of silence where the civil servants are only expected to obey and not reply. She refuses to be a part of such flattery and resigns from the service rather than be cowed down by a hypocritical system:

The Emergency had finished my career, but suddenly I didn't want a career in the crumbling unprofessionalism that bowed and scraped to a bogus emergency. (Sahgal 32)

Despite her defeat, Sonali remains hopeful within this stagnant and decayed system. Sonali, who is dejected, devotes herself fully to the study of decorative art of Mughal period in order to help a British couple named Marcella and Brian. Sonali is the symbol of progressive woman. Her optimistic outlook is a direct result of her inner strength, which enables her to endure social oppression. The novel appears to depict Sonali's transformation from a disillusioned administrative officer to the realisation that she is "young and alive" (Sahgal 301) and the emergence of a newly found enthusiasm for life. Without losing her emotional balance, she makes decisions regarding her future with great clarity. She serves as a beacon of hope and a lantern of guidance, exemplifying the emancipation of women.

Sahgal has also concentrated on the social ills, such as Sati, in *Rich Like Us*. Sati (the immolation of Hindu widows) has been prohibited since 1829, yet continues to be practiced clandestinely into the twentieth century. In the novel, the ghastly depiction of atrocities and crudities inflicted on women in the past is presented through the episodes of Sati. Sahgal in the novel depicts the fate of a dowager who declined to return to the fire in the wake of getting away:

When the inhuman relatives saw this, they took her by the head and heels and threw her into the fire, and held her there till they were driven away by the heat; they also took up large blocks of wood with which they struck her, in order to deprive her of her senses, but she again made her escape, and without any help ran directly into the river...The people of her house followed her here and tried to drown her by pressing her under water. (Sahgal 154)

Another example of Sati is of Sonali's great grandmother. Sonali after her father's death found a small manuscript at the bottom of a trunk, marked in her father's hand writing, "Written by my father in 1915" (Sahgal 147). As she goes through it she comes to know about the brutality of the evil practice of sati. It is seen even after the abolition of sati in the twentieth century, there is a Roop Kanwar Sati case (1987) of

a young woman burned to death in the village of Rajasthan. This shows how the regressive traditional elements began to crop up in India after independence.

The pathetic state of women in our male-dominated society is brought to the forefront by an acute observation of their position. The novel also highlights another appalling form of abuse against women, as a beggar recounts the abduction of female labourers into sexual slavery by corrupt businessmen and policemen.

.... women labourers disappeared into the Kilns where they worked and the pig holes where they lived, sometimes never to return, used, he said, by the kiln masters and their men when they had finished carrying brick loads for the day. Some came back to the village when they were hard and old to recruit young girls for the kilns. (Sahgal 81)

He weeps as he recounts the disappearance of his own wife, who, like numerous others, must have succumbed to the desire of the brick-kiln owners. The crippled beggar is a representation of the Indian masses that have been beaten and crippled by the governing class. They are defenceless and silent, victims of unending oppression and injustice. In Sahgal's fiction, these atrocities, which are recounted in the novel, are instances of social class and gender as determinants of oppression and discrimination. A genuine image of contemporary India, where crime, corruption, and greed are pervasive, is painted by the deterioration of moral standards. The message of nonviolence, truth and justice has been transformed into decadence by the game of power.

Rose is one of the numerous victims of patriarchy and the game of power. She is a British immigrant and wife of an Indian businessman Ram. During a business trip to England, Ram encounters Rose, a twenty-year-old lower-class Cockney Englishwoman and both of them fell in love with each other. Rose is candid, perceptive and empathetic woman. Rose abandons her nation and her lonely parents to become Ram's second wife in India. She blindly trusts her impulses, which leads her to take numerous life-threatening risks. Neglecting her identity, she accompanies Ram in pursuit of her new existence. After getting through the shocks of the first few weeks of adjustment, she learns to live with humiliation and neglect. She serves as a testament to the oppression that women endure in the male-dominated social

structure. Rose experiences difficulty in establishing a sense of belonging in this alien society, which is characterised by prehistoric customs. Rose's blunt, unvarnished discourse in her cockney accent and her status as a misfit in Indian society are in stark contrast to the refined language of the privileged. She experiences feelings of alienation in India due to the foreign culture and the house, which neither invites nor requires her.

Rose is subjected to hostility by Mona, Ram's first wife. It's normal for all women to feel hostile. As no wife can tolerate the presence of another woman in her home and life. Rose and Mona engage in a cold conflict. Rose could understand it as: "a natural enough reaction to an intruder, a usurper" (Sahgal 62). Later experiencing significant distress regarding her unfortunate situations, she refrained from requesting Ram to arrange her return to England, ultimately choosing to accept her marriage to him.

Rose is once again left feeling isolated and betrayed when Ram develops feelings for Marcella, another woman. The condition of Rose further deteriorates as the family's control is transmitted from one patriarch to another, specifically from Ram to his son Dev. She comes to the realisation that her rights as a wife are being called into question as Ram's condition worsens, lying paralysed and useless. Dev, Ram's son from his other wife, Mona schemes to take all Ram's assets by disposing of Rose. Rose, who has a legal claim to a portion of Ram's property, is left destitute. Dev is found to be forging Ram's money, which results in her astonishment. She shares her mental and emotional space with her friend Sonali, with whom she discusses this issue. However, before Sonali could take action, Rose is murdered by her stepson Dev and her corpse is disposed of in the well. In this novel, Rose, a courageous woman, withstands her values and shows reverence for the traditional Hindu system despite being a foreign woman in order to adapt to her married life. However, her role as a strong woman has resulted in her murder towards the end of the novel. This is the plight of Rose who is sacrificed on the altar of power and wealth.

Sahgal's novels address the significant feminist themes of male supremacy and domination over females in marriage. In *Rich Like Us*, Mona, Ram's first wife, is depicted as a stereotypical, long-suffering wife who employs all means to rescue her husband from the snares of the English woman Rose. Rose's arrival in Ram's life

creates a vacuum in Mona's. She experiences feelings of humiliation and the anguish of relinquishing her authority over him. Mona is an example of a typical Indian woman who dares not to raise a voice against her husband's actions but weeps in silence. She also observes numerous fasts and conducts countless religious pujas in an attempt to reunite with her husband. However, she is unable to do so and, in a state of desperation, attempts to commit suicide. This is the final option available to a virtuous Hindu woman, who is to be cremated by her husband in order to retain her status as his legally married wife. Fortunately for her, she is rescued by her adversary, Rose, whom she had previously despised. This event serves as a new opportunity to explore their strained relationship. Even Rose forgets the past and becomes her friend after saving her life. Mona now confides in Rose about everything. In her pursuit of a suitable girl for her son Dev, she seeks the advice of Rose. These two women exemplify the pinnacle of love and generosity.

Mona's relationship with Rose culminates in her final days, when she regards her as an equal, as evidenced by her statement, "I thought you should meet your daughter-in-law to be" (Sahgal 208), which brings Rose joy and completeness. Mona turns to Rose on her deathbed as she is dying of cancer, requesting that their daughter-in-law Nishi be adequately cared for. She is transferring a valuable possession to her, in effect saying, "She is yours now" (Sahgal 210).

Consequently, it is evident that the lives of both Mona and Rose are defined by insecurity and anguish. Their marriage to Ram results in their subjugation, reducing them to mere dolls in the hands of Ram. Mona and Rose are subjected to the male egoism of Ram, which results in feelings of isolation, suffering, helplessness and oppression. Their economic dependence and where-to-go considerations also compel them to permit Ram's infidelity to continue and bear upon the traditional sanction of his polygamy. In the society, polygamy is one of the most significant issues that women face. Both women, Rose and Mona, endure suffering as a result of Ram's bigamous relationship. They endured profound mental anguish. It is seen that the practice of polygamy within the patriarchal system is the root cause of the humiliation, violation, exploitation and death of numerous victimised and suppressed women in the society.

Conclusion

Rich Like Us is truly an eye-opener that sets out to analyse the functioning of the Indian political and administrative machinery and injustice towards women. The novelist is trying to induce individuals to exercise their will power, resist the domination of the corrupt power-drunk politicians and any kind of discrimination to prevent a possible disaster. The novel clearly picturises hardships in the lives of women characters Sonali, Rose and Mona. In the world of power and male chauvinism, they are consistently ignored and regarded as inferior. The views and ideas of these women are disregarded and dismissed as primitive and absurd. The novel's theme is deeply rooted in the integrity and loyalty of these women, as well as their afflictions and states of helplessness, and the manner in which they are victimised. Sahgal has poignantly addressed the issues of women's power, emancipation, their quest for space and individuality, and their modest role that is appropriate for the sociological, economic, and intellectual needs of the current era of rapid change and instability. In the novel, adversity is confronted by women who courageously maintain their dignity, learn to cope with grief, and exhibit compassion and sensitivity towards those in their midst. Sahgal, as an advocate for individual rights, has a particular commitment to ensuring that women receive equal treatment, acknowledgement and the liberty necessary for individual fulfilment.

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