



Dictatorship In Democracy: Monopolization Of Power in Sahgal's *Rich Like Us*

Dr. K. Haresh Nirmal

Assistant Professor Research Department of English Sri S. Ramasamy Naidu Memorial College, Sattur

Abstract: Nayantara Sahgal is the first and foremost prominent woman writer who wrote novels in the political background. Since she belongs to the Indian political family, she has the ability to mix up facts with fiction. She pictures her personal encounter and experience of Indian politics in her novels because politics has entered in her life in her early age itself. Sahgal beautifully pictures the impact of emergency in society in her sixth novel *Rich Like Us*. It presents a vivid picture of the emergency through different characters. This paper aims to bring out the effect of emergency on people's lives. It also focuses how political power has been misused for self-development.

Keywords: Emergency, Politics, Power, Corruption, Vasectomy Camp, dictatorship.

Nayantara Sahgal is one of the most prolific writers of Indian Writing in English. She is one of the first women writers, who receives wider recognition. Her novels distinctively deal with Political themes. She was born in Allahabad in 1927. She graduated in history from Wellesley College, Massachusetts in 1947. She has a strong political background. She is the daughter of Ranjit Sitaram Pandit and Vijayalakshmi Pandit, who are well-known fighters of the Independence Movement. She is the niece of Jawaharlal Nehru. Her strong political background makes her observe and capture the essence of the new political creed in the context of the passing of Gandhism and the disappearance of the ideological impulsions of Nehruism. So her novels are set against the socio-political background of India. Sahgal herself comments:

I am a novelist and a political journalist. My novels have a political background or political ambience. I didn't plan it that way – I was dealing with people and situations – but looking back, each one seems to reflect the hopes and fears the political scene held out to us at that time. (Sahgal 3)

Most of Sahgal's characters belong to the upper class of the Indian society. She does not write about the caste-ridden middle class or the poor villagers of India. But she sticks to the people whom she knows intimately. Her range of character simplifies the technique of her writing. Since she has first-hand knowledge of politics and political figures in India, she never struggles to write in the background of politics. Politics is imbibed in her blood. She cleverly intertwines history and fiction in her gradual journey from her first novel *A Time to Be Happy* to her last novel *Lesser Breeds*. Naomi Mitchison says, "As Nayantara grew up she saw politics from the inside. The world is implicit in her novels" (Mitchison, 1886-88). Nayantara Sahgal clearly states:

... the political situation is the background of all my books. I notice that nobody else in India, at least writing in English, has used the technique of having a political situation – a specific political situation as the backdrop of every single novel. There have been novels of political situation, isolated ones, but I have developed this as a genre, as a whole style of political novel, which uses political background but tells a story of human life against that ...". (Sahgal, 10)

In 1975, India experienced the greatest political crisis. Indira Gandhi became the Prime Minister of India in 1973. She failed to fulfil the common people's expectations so her popularity declined. There was poverty, and economic inequality throughout the country. In the year 1973, the price of crude oil increased which resulted in a massive increase in the prices of Petroleum and it affected the life of both poor and middle-class people. Economic inequality, Price hikes, and unemployment led to large-scale of industrial unrest and a wave of strikes



in the different parts of the country. The railway department also did not work for twenty-two days in the year 1974. Law and order in the country was totally collapsed. The Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi declared the State of Emergency in the early morning of 26th June 1975. It brought boundless power to the hands of the Prime Minister. Many people commented that Mrs. Indira Gandhi was blinded by the power and she imposed the emergency to safeguard her own political and personal interests. And a large number of people were arrested under the Maintenance of Internal Security Act. Some of them are smugglers, hoarders, black marketers and known gonads. Many people were released after a few days and months. State elections were postponed. The emergency gave immense power not only to Indira Gandhi but also to her son Sanjay Gandhi. He performed the atrocity of sterilization under the name of 'family planning'. People were forced to undergo family planning. The media also suffered immensely during the emergency. Severe censorship was imposed on Media such as Radio, Newspaper and Television. The emergency lasted till 1977 and it was lifted by the government. After the Emergency, Indira Gandhi faced fierce criticism for her actions. The result of the emergency is shown in the Lok Sabha election in 1977 in which the Janata Party under the leadership of Morarji Desai came to power. Later Indira Gandhi was arrested on account of various cases against her.

Nayantara Sahgal presents a vivid picture of Emergency in her novel Rich Like Us. It presents a picture of India after Independence but primarily focuses on the political and state of affairs during the Emergency. This novel combines the political events that happened in pre-independence, post-independence and the period of Emergency of Indian history. It is coveted by two prestigious awards as Sahitya Akademi and the Sinclair Prize. It is one of the best of her novels. Rich Like Us presents a wide range of themes such as personal dilemmas and problems, joys and sorrows, frustration and fulfilment of female protagonists to the political upheavals that India experienced after Independence. Jasbir Jain praises the novel as a discerning political biography, the story of a country in which the protagonist is India.

Rich Like Us is set in New Delhi and presents the story of two women Sonali and Rose in the backdrop of Emergency. The action of the novel revolves around "... many little victims the snapping jaws of the Emergency were claiming in the course of an ordinary working day, how many big and small tyrants one act of whimsy had created"(252). Some of the characters in this novel represent the original characters of the time of emergency. The characters who play important roles are Sonali, the IAS topper who joined as a Joint Secretary in the Ministry of Industry, Dev, Ram's son by his Indian wife Mona, Ravi Kachru, the IAS officer, and Rose, Ram's second wife who is from London. Emergency provides a topsy-turvy change in their lives.

Sahgal clearly pictured the objectives and functioning of Emergency and its effect on the lives of the people in its nexus with politics, business, and crime. The hard work and production of the farmers and workers had been exploited and they had been washed out because of the individual benefits of few people. Vasectomy camps had been forced on the old and even the unmarried people. The media and Newspapers are also put into the control of the government. Even though the press and media were in control, there were whispering campaigns and protests against the emergency. Sahgal presented the monopolization of power through the character of Dev, who was modelled on Sanjay Gandhi, son of Indira Gandhi. He was the epitome of the dictatorship. The declaration of emergency witnessed the fast exchange of power from mother to son which led the city to its crisis. He proposed many changes in Delhi such as blowing up tenements, vasectomising the masses and setting up the Youth camps. Dev called the Emergency a boon to the country. But Sahgal proved that it had been a boon to the people who were in power and authority in this novel. T.N. Dhar comments,

One of the dismal feature of the times, the novel stresses, was that Madam, succeeded in getting support of lawyers, professors, newspapers, editors, and other liberal progressive groups for her unrestricted use of power. (Dhar, 153)

As an ardent supporter of Emergency, Dev had proudly declared to his foreign guest, Newman, a foreign collaborator of the fizzy drink Happyola factory that Emergency had been a boon to the country and the



opposition had been wiped off effusively with the power. He justifies the effect of the Emergency on economic and business considerations. He says:

... this emergency is just what we needed. The troublemakers are in jail. Opposition is something we never needed. The way the country is being run now, with one person giving the orders, and no one being allowed to make a fuss about it in the cabinet or in parliament, means that things can go full steam ahead without delays and weighing pros and cons forever. Strikes are banned. (2)

He also said that the emergency had paved a new way to some new project – opening of a new factory for the production of a fizzy drink “Happyola.” Newman came to India in search of a market, and Dev was the Indian collaborator. Newman observed the passion and craziness of Indians for the imported things. The confinement to the present was the strength of Dev, the aim of Emergency and the weakness of the country. The project of the fizzy drink gained its support from the blind supporters of Emergency such as the Joint Secretary and the Minister of Industry, Ravi Kachru. Dev and his wife told him that Indians are realizing that “business is business” and the son of the Prime Minister also indulged in business making “a people’s car”(12).

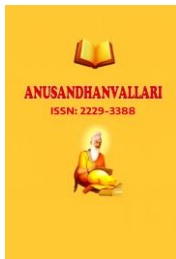
Sonali is another central character who suffers a lot in the wake of the Emergency. She represented the good and modern Indian womanhood. Through Sonali, Sahgal beautifully described the conspiracy of silence practised by the members of civil service.

But how much better were the rest of us, pretending the emergence was an emergency when civil servants should know what a real emergency is? They’ve dealt with all kinds, partition, famine, war, refugees on a scale on so monumental it made refugees of all disasters till then and many after look minor migrations. We knew there was no emergency. If it had been, the priorities would have been different. We were all taking part in a thinly disguised masquerade, preparing the stage for family rule. And we are involved in a conspiracy of silence. (23-24)

Sonali was an ardent follower of Mahatma Gandhi, whose principles were imbibed by her from her father Keshav Renede. She found herself as an alien in this political world. She considered her old friend and once a suitor, Ravi Kachru who had begun to play politics as if their life totally belonged to the political parties and the government. One month after the declaration of Emergency, Sonali rejected the proposal to import the fizzy drink Happyola. She was not aware of the secret deal between the minister and a foreign businessman and his Indian collaborator. So she wrote an unfavourable note on the project. But the visiting representative of the company met her in her office and mentioned that he had already had the favourable car of the Minister. But she refused to do a favour for him. She did not know that this project was only to cover up for the import and storage of car parts required for the manufacture of an indigenous car by the Prime Minister’s younger son. Then she received a phone call which informed that she had been transferred to her own state where there was no vacancy at her level. So she clearly understands, “I hadn’t merely been demoted, punished and humiliated and I had no inkling why?” (22-23). She felt very bitter and frustrated and she said that society gave importance to people who were in higher power than the honest officers. She realized that her administrative training did not prepare her for handling the new situation which arose out of political dominating the administration.

Once upon a time we had thought of the civil services as “We” and the politicians as “they” – two different sides of the coin. We were bound by more than discipline we partook of a mystique. Our job was to stay free of political circus. We were successors to the ICS, the “steel frame” the British had ruled with, but with more on our hands since independence than the steel frame had in two hundred years... The distinction between politics and the service had become so blurred over the last few years it had all but disappeared. The two sides were hopelessly mixed, with politicians meddling in administration and favourites like Kachru, the prime example playing politics as if his life depended on it. (22-23)

Sonali found it impossible to work in such a corrupted environment. She was not ready to fight with the corrupted system. She says, “Emergency had finished my career, but suddenly I did not want a career in the crumbling



unprofessionalism that bowed and scraped to bogus Emergency” (32). Sonali’s strong opinion on democracy made her to quit her job. She was helpless and could not do anything when Dev forged his father Ram’s cheques. So she decided to resign from her civil service because she could not compromise with the dictatorship. Sonali was much different than Ravi Kachru who was a silent supporter of the authoritarian government.

Sahgal pictured the loss of values of the politicians and bureaucrats during the Emergency of India. Ravi Kachru was one of the bureaucrats of Emergency. He supported the people who were in power. He supports Dev’s foreign project on the fizzy drink “Happyola”. When Sonali refuses to give permission to Dev to open the Happyola factory, she is replaced by Kachru.

He (Kachru) was to replace me immediately as Joint Secretary in the ministry of Industry. He waited for me to say something, and when I didn’t utter a word, he spread his hand in an apologetic gesture, turned round and walked out. If he had sneaked in and shot me I could not have been more dazed. Yet I remember thinking with a shaft of painful clarity what kind of automatons we of the civil service have become, and are not expected to reply... I hadn’t merely been transferred without warning. (31-32)

Rose was another character who suffered injustice and even death during the Emergency. She was Ram’s English wife, who had been humiliated and robbed of even a decent living allowance by Dev. Dev took the amount from the joint account of Ram and Rose by forging the signature of his paralysed father. Sonali’s efforts to help Rose were useless. Though the bank manager was aware of the forgery, he was unable to stop it. He feared Dev’s power and politics. He felt that if he did reveal his forgery, it would lead him to lose his life. This action of Dev showed the absolute power of authority and emergency. Kachru helped Rose to prevent the forgery but it failed. In the end, Rose is found dead in a well. She was blindfolded and cast into the well nearby. The suggestion of “... walking blindfolded off a gang-plank into the deep blue sea” (39) becomes true. Sonali came to know about it through a beggar who was the mute spectator of the scene. The beggar is too involved in the “conspiracy of silence.” Rose’s murder was protected and distracted by the political power and it was beyond the reach of justice.

Rich Like Us brings forth an depth analysis of the period of Emergency. A great deal of barbarianism had been created in the country during this period. Arun Shouri calls the struggle of people under Emergency the second freedom struggle. Vasectomy camps were formed by Madam’s son under the cover of beautifying the city. People were forced to undergo Vasectomy to control the increasing population of the country. Sahgal points out that as:

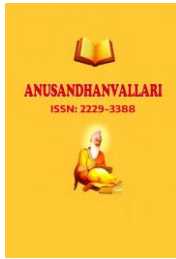
... vasectomizing the lower classes, blowing up tenements and scattering slum –dwellers to beautify Delhi, setting up youth camps with drop-outs in command, loafers and ruffians who would otherwise have been no more than loafers and ruffians. (62)

People were caught in the vans with iron-barred windows which were used for collecting stray dogs for vasectomy. A young man was dragged into the van for vasectomy symbolises the incident that a man who came for the renewal of his licence was forced to undergo sterilizing. Every government employee was forced to undergo a vasectomy to get their salary. Madam’s Son had bundled off 70,000 people at gunpoint to remove the slums in the name of beautifying Delhi. The emergency had an impact on the lives of the common people.

Sahgal effectively portrays the impact of Emergency on people’s lives. She cleverly presents the ill effects caused by Emergency through her fictional characters. Emergency was formed in favour of the people who were in power. It did not focus on bringing the development of common people. It paved the way to corruption, and misuse of power against the weak people. It led to the family rule of a country. The power was given in the hands of a single man who focused on self-development. Thus, Emergency is considered to be the sheer monopolisation of power.

Works Cited:

- [1] Sahgal, Nayantara. *Rich Like Us*. Delhi: HarperCollins, 2010. Print.



-
- [2] Bedi, Kiranjeet Kaur. "Nayantara Sahgal's *Rich like Us*: A Thematic Analysis." *The Criterion*. Vol. II: 1. 2011. <https://www.the-criterion.com/V2/n1/Kiranjeet.pdf>
- [3] Dhar, T.N. *History-Fiction Interface in Indian English Novel: Mulk Raj Anand, Nayantar Sahgal, Salman Rushdie, and O.V. Vijayan*. New Delhi: Prestige Books, 1999. Print.
- [4] Dayal, Abha. "Socio-Political Aspects In Nayantara Sahgal's *Rich Like Us*". *Think India Journal*. Vol.22:11. 2019.
- [5] Jain, Jasbir. *Nayantara Sahgal*. New Delhi: Arnold. Heinemann, 1978. Print.
- [6] Hassan, Nigeenah. "India Under Emergency: Rich Like Us Nayantara Sahgal". *Impact Factor* 4:6(2017): 137-139. Web. 05 Feb. 2018.
- [7] Pramela. R. "National Emergency in Nayantara Sahgal's *Rich Like Us*". *Language in India* 13:5 (2013). Web. 05 Feb. 2018.
- [8] Wasnik, Nitin Keshaorao. "Political Consciousness in Nayantara Sahgal's Novel '*Rich Like Us*': An Overview". *International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research*. 2023. <https://www.ijfmr.com/special-issues/2/232.pdf>