



Learning from Contradictions: A Journey from Democracy to Emergency in Nayantara Sahgal's Rich Like Us

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ABSTRACT

Emergency in the mid-seventies of the last century was a sordid chapter in modern Indian history. With a single stroke of the presidential pen on the night of June 25 1975, the world's largest democracy was reduced to a tin-pot dictatorship. The then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi revealed herself as a dictator and a climate of fear and subservience prevailed everywhere inflicting a lasting damage to democratic institutions founded and nurtured by her illustrious father Jawaharlal Nehru. To those who lived through it, Emergency was a 19-month nightmare. This paper entitled "Learning from contradictions: A Journey from Democracy to Emergency in Nayantara Sahgal's Rich Like Us" focuses on the historic Emergency period (26 June 1975 to 21 March 1977) which shook the very foundation of Indian democracy. This paper highlights the need for democracy, the drawbacks of Emergency and the aftermath that has resulted out of transition from the former to the latter, in a particular period of history of India. This article elaborates the given title with special reference to Nayantara Sahgal's Rich Like Us a fictional work which was published amidst controversies in 1985.

The bold dissenter to this nightmarish regime was Nayantara Sahgal, the coUsin of Indira Gandhi. She is the second daughter of Nehru's sister, Vijayalakshmi Pandit. Nayantara Sahgal, a self-professed Gandhian, who grew sharing the values and vision of her beloved, "mamu" Jawaharlal Nehru, took conscioUs pains to incorporate these values in her novels. The declaration of a state of Emergency in 1975 by her

cousin, Indira Gandhi compelled Sahgal to expose the negative repercussions of the authoritarian rule and the havoc it caused in the lives of a few innocent sensitive people in her novel Rich Like Us. Sahgal had the courage of conviction to offer a searing frank account of the Emergency and because of her anti-establishment views she was considered 'anathema'.

Writing political novels were Sahgal's forte. Her proximity to the political power has helped her to project the kaleidoscopic view of the political changes in the country. Sahgal traces the nation's journey from the rich democratic ideals which it had cherished since Gandhian times to the autocratic Emergency in her novel Rich Like Us. For her analysis, she chooses the sample from those sections of society with which she has the closest association – the world of politicians bureaucrats and businessmen. According to Srinivas Iyengar, Saghla shows in her fiction what goes on "in the corridors of power, in the drawing rooms of politically very important people or in the lobbies of the parliament" (Iyengar 473). Her novels are not political drama on stage but what goes behind the curtain all the time. The prime objective of the novelist is to make the individual aware of hypocrisy of the political drama enacted before his eyes and to stress the need for self-assertion, courage and conviction, to raise his voice against the people in power.

Nayantara Sahgal evokes a vivid picture of the Emergency in her novel Rich Like Us. According to C. Vijayashree, the novel brings out the loss of freedom in all spheres of life, public, personal and professional. The declaration of



emergency meant curtailing of freedom in many ways; censorship, erratic arrests, prevention of public meetings picking up at random victims for forced vasectomy, suppressing the opposition of all sorts and monopolization of power. Using the past as a point of reference, particularly the Gandhian Age when love of freedom freely flourished, she contrasts it with the troubled seventies in India and demonstrates convincingly that the Emergency has put democracy in deep danger. (23)

Sahgal brings out the contrast between the democracy and the Emergency quite effectively in the novel *Rich Like Us*. The story of the novel is silhouetted against the back drop of the Indian socio-political ethos, its economic disparities, rampant corruption, the hoary past with the cruel tradition of sati and the political upheavals of 1975. The narrative flows in the first person from the perspective of an idealist IAS officer, Sonali, the Joint secretary in the Ministry of Industry and the story of Rose is narrated in the third person by an unknown narrator. Rose, a British shop girl of London is hopelessly charmed by the young Indian businessman Ram N. Surya. She takes a huge risk in accompanying him to India which was under the last phase of British Raj. Rose marries him in India even though she knows he is already married to Mona and they have a toddler named Devikins. Rose saves Mona from suicide and in spite of her initial antagonism befriends her and Lalaji, Ram's father. Devikins is pampered and spoiled by Mona and he grows into a lazy man, squandering his father's wealth. He is rebellious toward Rose, his father's English wife, though his wife Nishi treats Rose as her own mother-in-law after Mona's death. Rose shows kindness to a crippled limbless beggar, who moves on his knees like a giant ant. Childless Rose showers her love on Sonali, Ram's friend Keshav Ranade's daughter and retain her ties with Sonali who grows into an intelligent IAS officer.

Sonali has a system of ideals which are severely shaken by Emergency. Her strong sense of service receives a blow when she refuses to sanction an approval to a foreign businessman to start a soft drink factory. She didn't know it was a cover up to import and store car parts required for the manufacture of an indigenous car by the Prime Minister's younger son. Sonali is demoted and transferred to her home state and Ravi Kachru her former lover takes over as the joint secretary. The factory which Sonali refused to approve is established with lots of Indian and foreign money given as bribe to the Minister of Industry. The Indian entrepreneur involved in this shady business is Dev, whose father Ram was in a state of coma.

Dev forges Rom's signature and withdraws huge sum of money, thus cheating his stepmother Rose who is unpalatable to him for her bluntness and outspokenness. Rose seeks the help of Sonali and Sonali talks to Ravi Kachru. Meanwhile, Rose meets an "accidental" death witnessed by the crippled beggar. He informs Sonali that it was a murder arranged by Dev. Ravi Kachru's intervention sends him out of favour of the power centre and he is about to be shunted out of Delhi. Sonali feels lonely and bereft after Rose's death. Dejected Sonali plunges wholeheartedly in the study of decorative art of Mughal period, to assist a British couple Marcella and Brian with a hope that the Emergency would be over soon.

Sonali, as a daughter of Keshav Ranade grew up sharing her father's veneration for Gandhi and his ideals. Sonali felt Gandhi had "taken human rights a hundred years ahead in two decades with a glimmer of class war" (125). Gandhi's strong adherence to principles like truth, honesty, simplicity, individual freedom, obeying one's own conscience, courage to face opposition and establishing the right to dissent and protest was fed in her blood by her father. Sonali's firm faith in Gandhian ideology is revealed in the discussion with Ravi Kachru when both were students of Oxford. Ravi Kachru supported Marxism but Sonali reminded him that communism had not won India its freedom whereas "Gandhi's non-violence had worked like a streak of forked lightning" (122). She didn't like Ravi Kachru's Eurocentric views and his act of judging India with European yardstick. Gandhi had proved that he could pack off the mighty empire without an atom bomb. According to Sonali the need of the hour was man like Gandhi. Gandhi had created a new vocabulary "Daridranarayan" (God of the Poor) and "Harijan". Sonali felt "This was the language of a new epic, invented by Gandhi. The men had used his brains and what we needed now was a like inventiveness to suit our condition" (125). Sonali's words reveal her as a staunch supporter of Gandhism.

In spite of her strong adherence to Gandhism, Sonali lacked the courage to oppose the autocratic regime. She along with the other of her civil service elite had shown "a collective will to cowardice" (31) and "preferred to take part in the masquerade preparing the stage for family rule" (23). She was passive to the hunger strike, the forced vasectomy done on poor or the disturbing arrest of a young man at Cannought place who was dragged to prison. All the Gandhian ideals nourished into her lay in some hidden part of her conscience. It is during a personal crisis that Sonali wakes up from



her stupar. She was punished demoted and transferred when she refused approval to start fizzy drink factory called Happyola which would store hidden car parts needed for the manufacture of an Indian car promised by the Prime Minister's son. Now she understood the pain of the people in the jail, the ineffectual struggle of the powerless against the powerful and she realized, "The same soundless nudge that landed me in the ditch had carted thousands off to jail, swept hundreds more out of sight distant "colonies" to live, herded as many like animals to sterilization center" (28).

Sonali felt helpless, hopeless and desperate after her demotion. Sonali was struck with hepatitis on the same day of her demotion, forcing her to lay in bed for several days. She turns to her father's memory who had died, for emotional sustenance. As she goes through his papers she finds a manuscript written by her grandfather in 1915 and some newspaper cutting of 1829 related to Sati law and another cutting of a 1823 letter to the editor". Sonali's great grandfather was a man of liberal views and he had resisted the sati practice, but ironically his wife was forced in to the act as a part of bargain for her son's future. Sonali's grandfather as a boy of nineteen had valiantly tried to prevent his mother from being burnt as a Sati victim only in vain. When he went to rescue her, his mother was already burnt "like a wax doll" in the pyre (167). He became mad with anger.

Madness propelled me forward and made a demon of me. I leapt upon my uncle and threw off the men who tried to stop me... I was half in the fire myself and if the scorching heat was singing my clothes I did not feel it. In a working corner of my brain I had but one object, to take at least one victim of my own, a life for a life. This reading provides Sonali a moment illumination. She understands that all are not passive before cruelty like her. The boy at Cannaugut place who resisted his arrest and her own grandfather who tried to save his mother from the cruel practice of 'Sati' inspired her to fight against the autocratic regime of emergency. She feel "If all the mice in the world stopped running away and stood their ground, cats would stop killing them" (142). History has recorded examples of cruelty like 'Sati' in the past, it also shows that they had been fought and needed to be fought. Sonali decides to fight against the atrocities of Emergency bravely.

Like the Empire which came to India with the "Civilizing mission", Emergency too was declared primarily to alleviate the poverty of masses and ensure that the poor could enjoy their fundamental human rights. During Emergency there was in addition a façade of discipline, punctuality

and efficiency behind which lies according to Meenakshi Sharma "The ugly reality of unwarranted constitutional amendments silencing political opposition, repressive police action, preventive arrests and detention without trial, exploitation of the poor and weak at all levels, vasectoncy camps, press censorship etc" (Sharma 10). Even great leaders like J.P a true fallower of Gandhi had to face detention without trial. During Emergency there was belief that the Prime Minister was blameless and all political corruption was planned without her knowledge. It is with this idea that Sonali's sister Kiran advises her to go to "the top" and explain the whole thing. Sonali's words to her sister reveals the author's anger, "There is a queer idea in Delhi's social circle that "the top" is a rational, intelligent human place and all the cunning and callousness is conceived at lower levels, behind "the tops" back" (33). Sonali's view point which is critical of Emergency rule is close to that of the author herself. Sahgal through Sonali is bold in attacking the emergency unlike many writes of her age who preferred to remain silent even after witnessing many atrocities around them.

The aim of the novel is to suggest that Emergency was a difficult time for common people because resistance to authority led only to suffering and torture. The anti – people policies expounded by the Prime Minister's son targeted the weaker section of the society. Sahgal is angry when she says 'Madam's son had, vasectomizing the lower classes, blowing up tenements and scattering slum dwellers to beautify Delhi, setting up youth camps with drop-outs in command, ... (100). Infact the atmosphere of Emergency was stifling and suffocating the freedom of common men. Emergency worked havoc not only in the lives of Sonali and Rose but also in the lives of sensitive and ordinary people like Kishori Lal. The sufferings of Kishori Lal (Nishi's father) who is arrested and humiliated under the charge of being a "Saboteur part of conspiracy to overthrow the government" (216) and branded as RSS man is pitiable. So is the plight of young boy who was arrested at Connaught place suspected for being a Marxist. The punishment inflicted on the political prisoner was very cruel, similar to what the Russians did to the Germans. The policemen tried several methods of tortures like upside down hanging, rods up anuses, lighted cigarettes held to tender organs etc. Such punishments were meant to silence the people who resisted the Emergency. In fact the government succeeded in silencing the majority of the common people worried about their personal safety and their family.



One of the many victims of the Emergency is Rose whose story is closely interwoven with the story of Sonali. Emergency has brought frustration and hardship to the two women Rose and Sonali, Sonali faces hardships in her profession whereas Rose meets domestic problems. Sahgal has portrayed this strong-minded woman Rose as a misfit in elite Indian society. Her blunt unvarnished talk in her cockney accent clashes with the refined language of the elite. She doesn't understand why Ram wishes to entertain important business guests at a five star hotel, when her father-in-law believed in an honest business. The simplicity of life taught – by Gandhi was not practiced in any sphere without any pomp. She talks in her cockney accent a visitor. "Take my father – in- law. 'E never saw a contract in' is life couldn't speak a word in English. Wouldn't even have chairs and tables in 'is part of the 'ouse. 'E was a villager, that's wot'e was and that's wot'e stayed till' 'is dying day" (6).

The author reveals her own admiration for simple and honest life through Rose's dialogue. Rose is angry when she comes to know that the government had acquired the land for the car factory destroying the homes of the poor with namesake compensations. She tells to her stepson " And I suppose it would be all the same to you if a bulldozer came along and leveled this 'ouse and you were given com – peng – sasy – tion" (9). Rose an outsider lashes mercilessly against the corruption of Emergency fearlessly. Though Rose is aware that Emergency supported anti-people policies and programmes of the new government, she doesn't hesitate to interfere and rescue the crippled limbless beggar from Nishi who wanted to send him to vasectomy to increase her family planning figures. Rose angrily interferes, telling Nishi "It's no use taking him" said Rose "he's not even a whole man. He won't count" (98), Rose champions the cause of the poor and powerless as she is full of compassion Ironically she herself falls a victim to the nightmarish Emergency.

Dev, the stepson of Rose is an active supporter of the new regime as he is profited by the Emergency. According to Dev, Emergency had brought stability to the country and created a healthy climate for business, trade and industry. He tells to Mr. Newman a foreigner. This Emergency is just what we needed. The trouble makers are in jail, An opposition something we never needed. The way the country's being run now, with one person giving orders and no one being allowed to make a fuss about it in the cabinet or in parliament, means things can go full Steam ahead without delays and

weighing pros and cons forever, Strikes are banned. It's going to be very good for business. (2).

Dev justifies Emergency on economic grounds and the politicians consider it a liberating force to improve the conditions of the weaker sections of the society which never materialized. According to Sahgal Emergency was nothing less than "modern authoritarianism" which flouted all established democratic practices and norms to create an atmosphere of fear and hate.

Nayantara Sahgal's Rich Like Us is packed with the ugly reality of Emergency, a reversal of value systems preached by Gandhij. According to Sahgal no more is the average Indian simple and contented but "are reaching for their share of the goods of the earth." "Too many of the simple men and women who ruled us along with their sons and daughters and in-laws and best friends have eared the rest of us of simplicity forever" (53). Riches, not honestly earned, the rampant corruption at all levels, the dishonest hoarding of black money reveal the ugly face of emergency as a contradictory era to the democratic period.

Now with the passage of time, people are realizing that governments are capable of doing terrible things without a formal proclamation of the Emergency. The British Empire was satisfied looting India and making people poor and the indigenous government helps wealth to glitter in the hands of a chosen few like the corporate giants, creating a desire for dishonest hoarding of black money in the hearts of the majority. This new kind of 'riches' which would have been considered evil in Gandhian India has become the bone of contention in post-independent India with people taking sides as those for it (supporting corruption and black money) and a few like Anna Hazare and Kejriwal against it. The appearance of Anna Hazare and his team in the political arena has created ripples. His demand for a strong Lokpal remains unfulfilled. Kejriwal's revelation of black money holders and the list of corrupted ministers shouldn't be treated merely as sensational news. People should join hands with these Gandhians and the media, to destroy corruption that continues to be a menacing threat to the democracy of India. It is high time people realized the need for a strong Lokpal which would serve as a veritable "Brahamstra" in the hands of every Indian citizen.

From the point of view of narrative strategy Rich Like Us is perhaps the most accomplished of Mrs. Sahgal's novels so far. Nayantara Sahgal chooses an effective narrative device for the realistic depiction of the contemporary socio-political chaos-the double perspective. The two characters which



remain at the centre of the action are Sonali and Rose. Sonali's experience is narrated by herself in first person while the story that revolves around Rose is narrated by the author employing the tone of benign observer, objective detached, politely ironical and sharply critical. The narrative oscillates between the past and present without any jolt to the reader's comprehension of assimilating the chronological sequence. Sahgal's urbane and elegant English successfully establish a chatty lucid style of Rich Like Us. The double perspective show her commend over language and her deft employment of irony, sarcasm, idiom colloquialism and the cockney accent in Rose's dialogue reveals her exceptional language quality which very few Indo-English novelists display. Gentle irony prevails throughout the novel which makes Rich Like Us an excellent achievement of the author.

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