



Assorted Expressions of Power in the Women Characters of Nayantara Sahgal's

Rich Like Us

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“The country had been in a mess, people screaming for more wages or bonus, or just screaming, too many political parties, so humiliating to explain to foreigners. And then overnight a magical calm had descended like in Taiwan or Singapore. The idea of a leader, someone to look up to...fulfilled a yearning for tidiness, and *a woman in command* put at least one woman beyond the furies all others face. And then the Emergency was so popular.” (*Rich Like Us* 87, emphasis added)

Nayantara Sahgal (b. 1927) hails from the “first family” of Indian politics with Jawaharlal Nehru for maternal uncle, she being the daughter of Vijaylakshmi Pandit and a Maharashtrian Sanskrit scholar Ranjit Sitaram Pandit. A major part of her childhood was spent in the ancestral home of the Nehrus– the Anand Bhawan in Allahabad, replete with early memories of the freedom movement as documented in her first autobiography –*Prison and Chocolate Cake* (1954). Her sixth and perhaps the best novel, *Rich Like Us* (1985) was awarded the Sinclair Prize in 1985 and the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1986. Given her fascination and natural engagement with politics, Sahgal spins her tales around significant political events in the country, deftly tracing their implications in the personal lives of the men and women at the helm, as it were, of

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such affairs. The world of *Rich Like Us* is poised at a crucial juncture in the history of Indian polity— the state emergency of 1975-77 declared by India's first woman prime minister, Indira Gandhi. This paper seeks to examine and reveal the assorted expressions of power with respect to the women characters in the novel *Rich Like Us*.

Women and power are conventionally thought to be binary opposites in traditional societies like India. Women are expected to conform to socially constructed gender roles and any transgression wherefrom leads to a prompt branding of being “shameless” and “unwomanly”. The very characteristics of women that Mary Wollstonecraft had effectively denounced in *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792) are still held dear in popular consciousness and valued highly especially for matrimonial considerations. Unfortunately, education and professional competence hold little or no meaning in many Indian families seeking “beautiful, fair-skinned, homely” brides for their dubious “well-settled” sons as is evident from matrimonial advertisements in the newspapers. Women are dubbed as inferior and indistinct persons, forever meant to obey and never command. Simone de Beauvoir's declaration of one not being born as but becoming a woman rings true in such contorted perceptions of gender relations in the society. The novel *Rich Like Us* portrays the status of women as seen in the Indian society. Many uncomfortable questions are raised— why is it that God saved Draupadiⁱ, who also had to marry five men for no fault of hers, whereas Sitaⁱⁱ had to pray to be swallowed by the earth despite proving her chastity through trial by fire. The protagonist Sonali makes a scathing observation— “It all depends on whether you are on the right side of power and omnipotence. Sita wasn't and it was banishment to the wilderness for her” (252). While the men confidently invoke the figures of Krishna and Draupadi to justify multiple spouses, it is the woman who has to follow the norm— to compulsorily marry, to comply and be obedient, bear children to be the mistress of her own house, to commit *Sati*ⁱⁱⁱ in order to avoid the ordeals of widowhood, to serve in temples for being a child widow and so on. In such a scenario, it is useful to analyse the major women characters of *Rich Like Us* in whom one can detect various expressions of power and agency— they may not be highly “successful” in their personal and social lives, but they do indicate winds of change and renewed negotiation as well as contestation of their day-to-day lived experience. Representation of such women expressing various kinds of power is significant— the act of representation itself being a political act intrinsically crucial to production and dissemination of knowledge and subsequently, leading to exercise of power.

Indira Gandhi (1917-1984), famously known to be “the iron lady”, was India’s third Prime Minister, the first and the only woman to hold this office. In an extremely unpopular move, she imposed a brief but grim period of state emergency from 26th June 1975 till 21st March 1977 continuing for nearly twenty one months. This crucial event and its reverberations in the lives of the urban people form the background of the novel. Indira Gandhi as the Prime Minister with her “stern unsmiling face” (2), is one of the four actual figures identified in the novel; the other three being Nehru, Lal Bahadur Shastri and Jayaprakash Narayan (JP). Gandhi’s infamous younger son Sanjay is cleverly referred to as “madam’s son”, emphasising the source of his unhindered exercise of power, flowering in his notoriety for getting rid of slums, sterilizing scores of people under the pretence of population control or flooding the jails with numerous political prisoners. Sahgal exposes the yet-unabated issue of hereditary/dynastic succession propounded as a “natural” course of action. Sonali, an I.A.S. officer and the first-person narrator notes this in a tone of detached despair–

We all knew this was no emergency...We were all taking part in a thinly disguised masquerade, preparing the stage for family rule...No one wanted trouble...we played along, pretending the Empress’ new clothes were beautiful. (23-24)

What follows is a clear-eyed account of the event of the Emergency itself and its brutality: mass illegal detentions of dissenters, vasectomy centres, slum clearing from urban areas, huge bribes/hawala, ostentatious foundation-laying ceremonies, untamed power of the policemen, torture in police stations, detention of umpteen political prisoners, promotion of corrupt but loyalist officials, demoting those with any conscience, stifling censorship and curbing of all natural- legal rights of citizens. The facade of impeccable law and order and meticulous functioning of the government was kept up for public view at all costs. As seen in the opening quote, the rule of a *woman* meant two things– firstly a certain “tidiness” in running the political affairs and secondly, the feeling that at least one woman had gone beyond the “furies” of day-to-day subjugation of women; the people’s movement for a better life being likened to anarchy and chaos, the “popular” Emergency enforced a “magical calm” in the country (87). The power of “Madam” seeped down to other wheels in the machinery: (a) her megalomaniac still-under-her-wings son, (b) the corrupt minister of industry hoarding bribes through his daughter-in-law, (c) the scheming entrepreneur Dev– a headstrong indolent young man who joins hands with

Madam's son i.e. Sanjay Gandhi for smuggling in imported parts for the "people's car" under the guise of a petty soft-drink factory and forging cheques to get his father's money to fund his bribes and political ambitions; and, (d) the rapidly rising sycophant I.A.S officer Ravi Kachru who "radiated sincerity...earnestness and commitment" (26) making a "ceremony of everything from lighting a cigarette to opening a conversation..." (27). Hence, Indira Gandhi becomes the overarching emblem of political power with the nation being ruled by "one and a half people" (33) i.e. including her son. To understand the prevailing situation, one could refer to JP's caustic reminder to Indira Gandhi in an open letter: "Dear Indiraji, Please do not identify yourself with the nation. You are not immortal, India is" (Dandavate 223).

The novel is woven around a dual narrative— Sonali is the narrator in first person and the other is the omniscient narrator alternating between three voices— that of Rose, Nishi and her father Kisorilal. The novel partly deals with the life of a young and committed Oxford-educated I.A.S. officer Sonali, who possesses the intellectual strength to tear apart clichéd and outmoded traditions. She lets her family know her horror of an arranged marriage and consequently an inevitably stifling life. She is posted as a joint secretary in the Ministry of Industry, and in that capacity, one expects her to wield considerable power, being a woman officer working in the reign of a woman Prime Minister. On the other hand, when she exercises her power to reject an application that has failed to impress her in terms of national welfare and logical necessity, she falls out of favour and gets abruptly demoted and transferred to her native state, in favour of her ex-fiancé and class fellow Ravi Kachru, who steadily climbs up the professional ladder, through unquestioning loyalty to the PM. Ravi is a Kashmiri like Nehru and hence his is an added claim for proximity with the reigning powers. Sonali succinctly evokes the hazards of being a woman as opposed to the privileged position of Ravi being a man:

...he was a man. He had never fought a battle for freedom...never had a sari throttling his legs, making walking in the wind and running to catch a bus a threat to life and limb, never had his mother set up a howl when he ...got a haircut. He had no idea what the simplest subjugations were all about. (123-124)

Sonali's mother is Kashmiri too, and prides her lineage, brushing over her husband's Maharashtrian roots. Sonali draws inspiration and strength from her I.C.S father of Gandhian principles, Keshav Ranade. She resents the fake conscientiousness of the current batch of

opportunistic civil servants like Kachru and questions his excessive devotion to this Kashmir-centred dynastic succession rather pointedly; what if the “royal family” of the emergency had come from “south of the Vindhyas, if it had a dark skin and spoke Tamil or Telugu, if its name was Venkatachalam or Balasubramaniam?”(60). The Emergency forces her into an in-depth analysis of the state of politics in the nation since independence, coming down to the current state of thinly-veiled dictatorship in an ostensibly democratic republic. Emerging from the cocoon of blind bureaucracy as she bids farewell to her office, Sonali rediscovers her humanity by pouring her heart out to an elderly childhood acquaintance– Rose, who willingly engulfs her in “maternal warmth” (46). The novel seems to map Sonali’s journey from that of a disillusioned thirty-eight year old administrative officer, towards realisation of her being “young and alive” (301) and unfolding a renewed zest for living.

The other part of the novel is seen through the story of Rose, introduced in the very first chapter, a cockney-accented chocolate shop girl from London who falls in love with an Indian garments-businessman Ram Surya, magnetically drawn to the enchanting world that he weaves around her by his eloquence. Despite knowing about Ram’s first wife Mona and a newborn son Dev, Rose leaves behind her lonely parents and forsakes her country to come to India as Ram’s second wife. She faithfully tends to her husband, paralysed after a heated argument with his son, her life in a limbo as she is “neither wife nor widow” (85) – with her not being legally married to Ram and hence devoid of any marital rights of a wife and with Ram paralyzed into a vegetative state, ripping apart whatever remained of her conjugal life with Ram. Interestingly, Rose finds her stern and firm voice after a couple of drinks as opposed to the Indians around her who shamelessly lapse into incessant nonsense after having had a drink too many. She bluntly questions the concealment of imported car parts in the basement of Dev’s manifest “Happyola” soft drink factory, resists his forging of his father’s signatures to withdraw huge sums of money from Rose and Ram’s joint bank account– to name a few. Rose symbolises personal courage, compassion and genuine human warmth. She takes many grave risks in her life trusting her instincts blindly, goes on to make friends with her unbending father-in-law Lalaji, even takes charge of the business when Ram pursues the seductive Marcella and, in the absence of any real fulfilment, creates a small circle around her with Sonali, the crippled beggar in the tomb and the faithful servant Kumar. It is the brave, outspoken and powerful voice of Rose that her stepson Dev finds unbearable and hence, gets her silenced forever through one of his youth camp thugs.

Mona the “legally-wedded” wife of Ram, is constructed as a stereotypical, long-suffering Hindu wife, who employs all means including religious- to win her husband back from the snares of the white other-woman i.e. Rose. She observes numerous fasts, holds umpteen religious pujas at her place for the purpose and, finding none useful, tries to immolate herself; that being the final measure available to a virtuous Hindu woman which is to be cremated by her husband thereby retaining her place as his legally wedded wife. (Un)Fortunately for her, she is saved by none other than her hitherto hated adversary– Rose, thereby opening a new window in their strained relationship. Till this incident, Mona seems to wield the power of the chaste Hindu wife: not refraining from trying to kill herself for the sake of her wifedom. But after this, her initial viciousness gives way to an acceptance of Rose– defined thereafter by her as both of them being “sisters” and Rose notes a “rich round ring” of an intimate “We are comrades!” (175) in the proclamation. It is only in Mona’s last days that her relationship with Rose reaches its culmination where she treats Rose as her equal – “I thought you should meet your daughter-in-law to be” (208), which makes Rose feel whole as it were and she affectionately kisses Mona on her cheeks. Instead of Ram, it is to Rose that Mona turns at her deathbed, asking for their daughter-in-law Nishi to be looked after properly, as if handing over a precious possession saying, “She’s yours now” (210).

Marcella, a cultured Englishwoman is a temptress who wields her sexual power to good effect, in contrast to Rose. Marcella epitomises the desirable liberated western woman– first seen with “neat gold braids around her head to silver-sandalled feet under the fragile chiffon of her frock” (74). The description goes on to emphasize her baroque superficiality and unreal persona:

Marcella brought to mind pictures in fairy tales of princesses disguised as goose-girls, princesses in high pointed gauzy headdresses and tiny-waisted flowing gowns, feeding swans in front of turreted castles. Snow queens and ice princesses.
(74-75)

She leads Ram into a stormy four-month long affair and then leaving him suddenly, returns to England. Ram falls into a state of infatuated sorrow from which he never fully recovers; as Rose observes, “Close up, he looked invalidated as with the crippling of some organ that would function poorly from now on...” (116). Thereafter, Ram continues in his blind pursuit of Marcella, ostensibly in the name of running an establishment, forsaking Rose for almost five

years during which Rose feels utterly alone and frustrated. It is pertinent to note here that it is with the intense anguish caused by Ram's dalliance with Marcella that Rose is able to experience the pain of a wronged wife, hitherto felt by Mona and this is captured by the omniscient narrator in a poetic image— "A breeze at the drawing room window...in the utter stillness the thin sobbing sound of pure grief no one was meant to hear, froze Mona's tears in Rose's eyes" (116). Ironically, it is Marcella at the end of the novel, who offers an olive branch to a confused Sonali unable to come to terms with Rose's murder. In the light of this offer of help, in conjunction with the evolved Mona-Rose relationship and the intense Rose-Sonali friendship, one observes that it is the women in the novel who help and comfort each other in times of need. At the same time, given her propensity for superficiality, one may wonder whether this transformation in Marcella's attitude is deep-rooted or not.

Dev's coquettish wife Nishi is "doll faced", "chiselled and snow-fair" (208). It is important to highlight here what Rose discovers when involved in a bride-hunt for Dev: that marriage is thought to be an "all-purpose cure" (203) for virtually everything from "sex-mania and sloth, impotence and imbecility" (203). In fact, Mona brushes away a twenty-year old Dev's alarming delinquency, instead declaring it the proper time for his marriage. She says: "His mind is not on it, poor boy. We must start looking for a girl for him" (202). Hence, both Mona and Rose set out to find a suitable bride for Dev; literally on mission scale, drafting advertisements with special emphasis on a fair-skinned, home-loving girl with an excellent social background. Ironically, it is only after they advertise "dowry no bar" (208), that Nishi is netted, and Dev gets married finally at the age of twenty-seven. Nishi is sketched as a slavishly devoted wife who goes around doing what "Devikins" asks of her, plays the impeccable hostess at all social events and in addition to convening and addressing meetings to further the Emergency and Madam's "twenty-point program", she ensures prompt action as in the case of the vasectomy drive for servants. She is unable to realise the gravity of Dev's forging signatures of her paralysed father-in-law Ram and seeks only to further Dev's ends in whatever small ways providence lays before her. Her father being a petty sanitary shop owner, she comes from a poor family, with eight siblings sharing beds and each other's clothes. She shirks from carrying out the responsibilities of adulthood, preferring to perpetually "look like a child...behaving like a child" (85). She finds it "more disturbing coping with the thirty-five-year-old adult she became only in (her father's) presence, her voice changing its timbre, her adult self omniscient with things to come that could

not be dispersed like fluffy chickens with her usual chatter” (89). Here one finds that Nishi may have another side to her flat personality which she does not have the courage or will to put forward with confidence. Her agency therefore, is seen only in coquettish conformity and gratefully grasping the gifts of providence. One wonders whether she would ever be able to develop a better understanding of herself and evolve into a mature and confident woman with opinions of her own.

Through this analysis of the major women characters in *Rich Like Us* i.e. Sonali, Rose, Mona, Nishi and Marcella, one observes how women deal with and wield power in more ways than one, while trying to usher in a positive change in their own lives as well as of those around them. The novel carries assorted expressions of power: intense and destructive political power wielded by Indira Gandhi, strength of character and resoluteness of Sonali, the voice of intellect and reason expressed by Rose, Mona's power of perseverance that blossoms into an unforeseen love with Rose, and the irresistible seductive power of Marcella which seems to get transmuted towards the end into a redeeming act of kindness for Sonali. In *Rich Like Us*, one finds women surviving in the midst of adversity while bravely holding their fort with dignity, learning to tide over grief to carry on with life and displaying compassion and sensitivity for those around them. Though Rose's cold-blooded murder remains unavenged, the ending of the novel does seem to suggest an affirmation in more ways than one— in the reconciliation of Ravi and Sonali; in the crippled beggar getting artificial limbs; in fulfilment of Rose's long cherished wish and, in the renewal of Sonali's zest for living, looking ahead to a bright future succeeding the Emergency. Whether these signs translate into any concrete resolution in the lives of such women is a matter of speculation.

Notes

¹ A character in the epic *The Mahabharata*, Draupadi was married to the five Pandavas as per their mother Kunti's misguided command. The event being referred to is of Lord Krishna coming to her aid and preserving her honor in the court where she was being disgraced by the Kauravas forcibly attempting to disrobe her in full public view.

ⁱⁱ In some versions of *The Ramayana*, King Rama is forced to abandon his pregnant wife Sita owing to slanderous allegations regarding her chastity by made some citizens of his kingdom. This even after Sita had stood trial by the Fire to prove her purity before being accepted by Rama. Later when Rama locates Sita and comes to meet her, Sita prays to the earth goddess to take her and enters the earth i.e. dies, denying Rama any reconciliation.

ⁱⁱⁱ In the funeral ritual of *Sati*, a good Hindu wife was supposed to immolate herself on her husband's funeral pyre and follow him to the other world. The idea behind this was that a woman cannot enjoy the pleasures of the world once her husband is dead. Widows who did not commit *Sati* were treated as an abomination. The practice of *Sati* was abolished by the British Government in 1829 though it continues in some parts of the country well into the twenty-first century.

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