

NAYANTARA SEHGAL'S *RICH LIKE US* – AN OVERVIEW IN CONTEXT OF ILLUSIONS TO HISTORY, GEOGRAPHY AND CURRENT SCIENCE



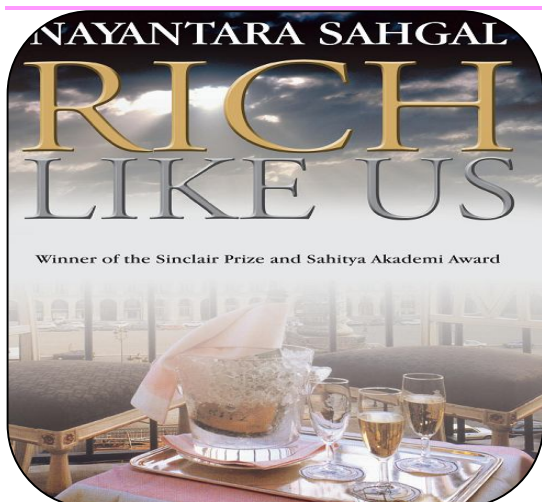
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Short profile

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**ABSTRACT**

Nayantara Sehgal is a novelist of political and social consciousness. There is a great social awareness of contemporary sensibilities in her novels. With keen awareness of the movement of social forces, memories of the colonial past and its impact on the people she brings out the political issues in a more urgent and immediate sense. Philosophically a Gandhian, she explores the collective dreams of the Indian people through her novels as an angry Gandhian of early generation of postcolonial India. Her novels deal with man's quest for his identity, man-woman relationship, East-West encounter and pre-occupation with Hindus and Hinduism. She shows a deep and abiding faith in individual freedom. The single unifying theme that runs through all her novels is man's growing

awareness of the implications of freedom. In novel after novel, she deals with the theme of liberation of the individual and elaborates it against the background of nation's struggle to achieve independence and safeguard the same. Her novels are a microcosm of life itself, the life that she keenly perceived around her. Sehgal knew that politics was, her background and environment and it became her natural material for her novels. Emergency was a turning point to her personally and fiction wise *Rich Like Us* was set against the background of Emergency. *Rich Like Us* (1985) is a daring novel about the Emergency period (1975-77), a controversial period in Indian politics.

**KEYWORDS :** social forces, memories , background and environment.

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**INTRODUCTION :**

Nayantara Sehgal is a novelist of political and social consciousness. There is a great social awareness of contemporary sensibilities in her novels. With keen awareness of the movement of social forces, memories of the colonial past and its impact on the people she brings out the political issues in a more urgent and immediate sense. Philosophically a Gandhian, she explores the collective dreams of the Indian people through her novels as an angry Gandhian of early generation of postcolonial India. Her novels deal with man's quest for his identity, man-woman relationship, East-West encounter and pre-occupation with Hindus and Hinduism. She shows a deep and abiding faith in individual freedom. The single unifying theme that runs through all her novels is man's growing awareness of the implications of freedom. In novel after novel, she deals with the theme of liberation of the individual and elaborates it against the background of nation's struggle to achieve independence and safeguard the same. Her novels are a microcosm of life itself, the life that she keenly perceived around her. Lakshmi Sinha puts this in a nutshell, "Nayantara Sehgal's literary world ... in a broad sense can be termed 'personalized fiction'. History, politics, autobiography and personalities intermingle in the novels of Sehgal" (Sinha: 13). Sehgal knew that politics was, her background and environment and it became her natural material for her novels. Emergency was a turning point to her personally and fiction wise *Rich Like Us* was set against the background of Emergency.

*Rich Like Us* (1985) is a daring novel about the Emergency period (1975-77), a controversial period in Indian politics. Sehgal's open disagreement with the Emergency regime of Mrs. Indira Gandhi, her first cousin, is partially framed by the fact that Sehgal, a committed socialist, is writing against capitalist invasion of India. Another point that opposes Sehgal to the Emergency rule is the subtle transformation of the latter into a clear dictatorship, the excesses of which Sehgal intends to denounce. This political tension is translated into a fictional argument constructed around a sense of deep crisis, which is the way Sehgal represents the 1970s India. When Sehgal wrote *Rich Like Us*, Mrs. Indira Gandhi returned to power for a second term, and it was in this period that she really parted with socialist's views for Indian economy. While writing about the Emergency as a dictatorial regime in the disguise of democracy, Sehgal criticized the beginning of the capitalist turn in Mrs. Indira Gandhi's policies, and beyond that, her abusive behaviour during 1975-1977 regarding censorship, imprisonment of political dissidents and massive sterilization campaigns. The Emergency period started overnight. On June 12, 1975, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi was found guilty of charges of campaign malpractice by the Allahabad's High Court. This conviction prevented Mrs. Gandhi from 'running for or holding any active elective office for a period of six years'. Politicians and newspapers demanded that Indira should give up her post as Prime Minister, organizing a huge demonstration against her on June 25<sup>th</sup>. On the dawn of 26<sup>th</sup>, Indira's elite force arrested the opposition political leaders. Hours later, the Prime Minister proclaimed the State of National Emergency, which included the suspension of basic civil rights and tight censorship over press. Thousands of students, journalists, lawyers and activists were summarily arrested. By the 28<sup>th</sup> and 29<sup>th</sup> amendments to the Constitution, Indira retroactively exonerated herself from impending legal charges, declaring this amendment immune to Supreme review. This autocratic behaviour revealed Indira Gandhi as the dictator she was, and a climate of fear and subservience determined the behaviour of those who wanted to stick to power and remain away from prison. Favour and nepotism replaced normal democratic procedures and caste aristocracies and regional identities took precedence over citizen's rights and legal arrangements. This is the political background for Nayantara Sehgal's novel, *Rich Like Us*, framing the representation of political violence as a very real issue. For the local intelligentsia, who had invested in a socialist project for India, the Emergency meant bitter disappointment and a sense of hopelessness.

The objectives and functioning of Emergency and its effects on the lives of the people have been glaringly exposed and the nexus between politics, business and crime are clearly revealed. The country is ruled by 'one and a half people' and the Emergency is 'a disguised masquerade to prepare the country for family rule,' a dictatorship to ensure family succession in a 'republic'. In fact, as an editor, a typical

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representative of the subservient press of the Emergency, says in the novel, “Madam had in good faith thought it her constitutional duty to override the constitution,” (Sehgal: 94) and a lawyer gives his professional opinion “that the Constitution would have to be drastically amended, if not re-written, to give madam powers to fight disruptive forces and crush the vested interests she had been battling against infancy.” (Sehgal: 95) The millennium had arrived disguised as an Emergency ‘headed by a Mother Tsar’ in whose support a number of delegations are going and her big toe is ‘already worn out with pilgrim kisses.’ All this is a window-dressing for the repressive police raj let loose on the people. ‘50,000 to 1,00,000 people are under detention without trial’ and ‘citizen’s hands are cut and he has to be a handless beggar for life.’ The suspicious Rose, as we have already seen, is silenced forever. The farmers and the workers are exploited and the resources of the whole nation are quietly siphoned off for the benefit of a few. There is exploitation galore. In forced vasectomy camps even the old and unmarried are not spared. All this ugly reality is given cosmetic touches in this novel. There is ‘the myth of a rational, human top’ quite unaware of the ugly goings-on and an appeal to which can possibly lead to redressal. There is a facade of discipline, punctuality and efficiency accompanied by a hypocritical public and private swearing by the ancient Indian scriptures, myths and ideals and repeated references to Mahatma Gandhi and assertions to serve the masses. But, in spite of controlled press and ‘news less newspapers’, the people are not taken in and there are whispering campaigns and open protests. Even in the bureaucracy, there are sensitive souls like Sonali who cannot be party to all corruptions and outrage against human dignity even though they may have to quit the service. Even Ravi Kachru, at one time the chief explainer of the Emergency, is at the end a disillusioned man thrown out of favour only because he has pleaded for Rose, a victim of deception and forgery. While focusing on the travesties of the Emergency, the novel moves through several convulsive periods in the history of the country: the days of the *Sati*, the freedom struggle and its values, Gandhi’s emancipatory effort, the Second World War, the Partition and the communal frenzy, and the deteriorating landscape of the mind in the Post-Independence situation. The portrayal of the upper strata of society who are as usual indifferent, insensitive to the chilling upheavals around, lost in their own small, rich, glamorous world of clubs, parties and get-togethers is unsurpassable.

The action in the novel revolves around many little victims - the snapping jaws of the Emergency and the big and small tyrants the Emergency created. Among the many victims are Sonali, a sincere, senior, civil servant, is pained to see the murder of democratic ideals. Her sudden apocalypse of her well-to-do grandparents’, especially her grandmother’s submission to *Sati* - an evil social system -leaves her dumb-founded for sometime. The entire political drama during Emergency is seen through the eyes of Sonali. Other victims are Rose, a cockney shop-girl turned an Indian businessman’s foreign wife who tries her best to make a passage to India eventually meets her death in the hands of a youth camp tough employed by her step son, Dev, one of the small tyrants the Emergency has created; Kishore Lal, a petty merchant, arrested and harassed by the police for being allegedly associated with the RSS and refuses to get released from prison on the recommendation of his politically influential son-in-law, Dev; a youth from the Nehru University severely manhandled and imprisoned for being a member of the Marxist Party whose sole ambition in life is to make revolution; and Ravi Kachru, a shrewd administrator who manages to ride the tide of popularity in the early days of the Emergency but eventually falls from grace when ‘he sticks his neck out of question the illegal transactions of Dev, later a Cabinet Minister in Madam’s government. These characters are all shown to be engaged in a search for values in the doubt-ridden, direction less contemporary world and striving towards self-realization and liberation. These are not isolated examples but representatives of the common predicament shared by the majority in the period of National Emergency. What is remarkable about all these characters is, when they are faced with a choice between escaping responsibility and taking it up squarely, they do not run away from responsibility even at the prospect of doom but meet the challenge half way. All of them respond readily to what is happening around them and register their protest in unmistakable terms. The love triangle of Ram, Rose and Mona, the tears and bleeding heart of Mona - Ram’s first wife and her

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religious fervour, her regular fasting peculiar of a traditional Hindu wife and later the development of friendship between co-wives are some of the incidents carefully blended into the main stream of the novel. Post-Independence India is truthfully projected through Sonali's experiences. Zamindari stem was abolished and cultivators were given land to till; untouchables were seen into all sorts of jobs. There was a tall talk of Indianising everything but the beggar on the street suffered his state as before. Even educated officers who adhered to principles encountered the devil of strategies, such as Sonali who was demoted because she refused to sanction the agency of 'happyola drink' though the agent had high connections among the weights. Sonali had to opt out of job as she refused to compromise with her ideals.

Though theoretically women are extolled as an angel, or a Goddess, in practice it is drastically a different story. Almost all human societies are male dominated and the predicament of women is much the same. *Rich Like Us* carries this theme that women precisely grow out of such trying circumstances. While the novel slips into parts of India, the nerve-wrecking scenes of 'Sati' are exposed and Sehgal implies that women even today continue to be martyrs. Sehgal vividly recalls the matchless patriotism, selflessness and sacrifices of freedom fighters before partition and contrasts them with greed, selfishness and shamelessness of contemporary politicians. In *Rich Like Us*, Sehgal copes effectively with the portrayal of what is wrong with the contemporary society, with the delineation of the moral dilemmas as well as with the aesthetic difficulties of conveying a positive message of action in the fictional format. In the novel, she had highlighted the need for intellectual and practical action to bring about efficacious changes in the contemporary society. The novel is an earnest effort to arouse people to induce them to participate emotionally and intellectually in what is happening around them. Here, her art does not crumble under the weight of political ideas but effectively conveys the essence of the same. As Mark Schorer rightly observes, "To say what one means in art is never easy and the more intimately one is implicated in one's material, the more difficult it is." (Varalakshmi: 77) If in *Rich Like Us*, Sehgal surmounts these problems, it is due to the strength of her convictions. Her vision of life, 'Where the mind is without fear,' emerges clearly here, and she makes a strong plea for individual freedom while elaborating her philosophy of active intervention in life. The novel not only gives the readers as accurate notion of how they are ruled, and some deep insights into the functioning of the political and administrative machinery but also shows how the human race, through its representative institutions destroys itself. The novelist is trying to induce the individual to exercise will power, resist the domination of the power-drunk politicians and prevent the possible disaster. The novel demonstrates her faith in the potentialities of the individual.

Sehgal aptly suggests her faith and hope through the symbolic limbless beggar. The beggar is the reality, which many shudder to face. He is the living evidence of man's inhumanity to man - as he asserts his rights, his hands are chopped off by his land-lord and he gets no redress from the political leaders who are all land-lords at heart. The mutilation does not intimidate his spirit and he remains a fearless fighter for freedom. When he is dragged to a vasectomy camp, he thrashes out, handless and crippled though, and flings himself out of their reach. Ironically, Rose who warns him day after day to be careful when he goes to the well, is herself pushed into the well while the beggar becomes the only witness to this brutal act done in the darkness of night. Towards the end of the narrative, Sonali arranges for artificial hands for the beggar, and he becomes a confident candidate for a new future with artificial hands thereby striking a note of hope and optimism. If there is a new future for the limbless beggar, there is no cause for despair. Self-confidence, strong will and effort can take man a long way. Sehgal, thus, is shrewdly realistic about political actualities and yet hopeful about man's potentialities and it is this blend of wry knowledge and romantic faith that distinguishes her work.

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