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**Nayantara Sahgal's Rich Like Us : A Critical Study****P. Madhurima,**Research Scholar, Rayalaseema University,  
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Nayantara Sahgal's Sinclair Prize-winning and Sahitya Akademi Award-earning, sixth fictional work, *Rich Like Us*, appeared in 1985 in continuation of her artistic commitment to feminist fiction. Here, she presents patriarchal where man wields every opportunity to use women to his utmost advantage and self-gratification. Indeed, the Novelist concerns herself with the domestic crisis of Rose and Mona, co-wives of Ram N. Surya, besides Sonali, the feminist protagonist. In one of her interviews Sahgal says :

*Rich Like Us* has two main characters, who are both women, Rose and Sonali but the main character really is Rose..It is her Story really and at some point it also becomes Sonali's.<sup>1</sup>

Sahgal's *Rich Like Us*, to any extent, is a piece of feminist fiction, in that, it shows how woman suffers in a tradition-bound society like India, where man wields every opportunity to use woman to his utmost advantage and self-gratification. It vividly describes show :

Women are exploited and victimized on all occasions in marriage in sexual relationships, in child birth and even in adultery.<sup>2</sup>

A story also of an older India, of a generation who remember the British Raj and Partition of the continuities and ties of family and caste and religion that stretch back and back.<sup>3</sup>

The concern of the novelist with the problems of women in a patriarchal society finds a powerful expression in this novel. Sahgal proposes to concentrate on how the women grow in strength in spite of trying in which they live. The novel centres round Sonali, the feminist protagonist, who is both an observer and a participant. Closely interwoven with her story is that of the domestic crisis of Rose and Mona, co-wives of Ram N. Surya. Among the other important women in the novel are Nishi and Marcela. In fact, all the women in the novel are almost a total India. Therefore, it is in this context not irrelevant to find that the quotations chosen from Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam and also those from *The Puckle Circula* connote the reflections of women particularly those pertaining to their sensitiveness to the male dominant society. However, a summary of the novel may do well for its feminist study.

Rose, "a woman in a sleeveless printdress, her hair dyed a peremptory scarlet" (p.11), is introduced in the opening pages of the novel. A twenty-year old "chocolate shop" pickup (p.41) she is the daughter of a working man in a bottle factory with very little formal education to her credit. She married Ram Swaroop, a prosperous Indian businessman. It is a marriage of her choice quite against the will of her parents. Knowing full well that Ram has already married Mona and has been blessed with a son, she is Caught in a trap that will not set her free. In an interview Sahgal says :

Rose keeps thinking that it is her destiny that Ram walked in one day and captivated her and she had no option but to follow him wherever...across the seas or over the mountains or wherever he would have taken her. It is the destiny of anyone who is struck like that by lightning to behave in this way.<sup>4</sup>

Rose and Ram sail for India together and spend the first few days quarrelling. Both she and Mona, Ram's first wife, "lived on different floors" (p.46) in the same building in Lahore. Rose pleads with her husband to give divorce to his first wife. Mona, but her pleas never yield themselves to any fruitfulness. She "felt angry bitter, wronged (p.62). "But, there develops strong intimacy between the two co-wives, for, Rose saved Mona, when the later in her desperate moment tries to commit suicide. The simplicity and innate goodness of Rose brings her close to Mona :

Strange how within those walls they had adventured over hills and woods into another pasture, Into friendship, and one fine morning into love. (p.185)

It is, when Ram has an affair with Marcella, another English woman, that Mona feels totally neglected and tries to commit suicide. Rose saves her from burning herself and with this incident a deep relationship develops between the two. Thereafter, Mona starts seeking Rose's advice in all household matters. Even at her deathbed before she dies of cancer, She looks at Rose for comfort and entrusts her to look after her newly married son, Dev and his wife Nishi, Saying :

She is yours now. And Rose stepped into the shoes Mona had vacated, a desolate place she no longer wanted for herself. (p.185)

When Ram suffers a stroke and falls into a coma, Dev forges Ram's signature to draw out money from the joint account of Ram and Rose. Rose then turns to Sonali for help but in vain. Rose is brutally murdered at the end.

Sonali, the protagonist, is perhaps created on the basis of the novelist's own experiences. It is through her that Sahgal reveals the true position of women in modern India. Nishi, who is married to Dev, is one more addition by the novelist to present the real position of women in a sexist and male-biased Indian society.

In a patriarchal society, man considers himself not only the master of his own life but also the creator of woman's destiny. He takes pride in using woman as a plaything, conditioning her always by his dictates. He even claims that it is normal for a man to seek gratification at both the physical and the emotional levels from as many women as he wishes. Ram is a case in point.

Ram, a man "who appreciated female flesh" (p.45) goes to England,

Where he is "intensely desirous and desirable" (p.41) to court Rose. With a legally married wife and a just-born infant in India, he deliberately and carefully starts, "erecting a world around her drawing her deep into it the door shutting, Rose inside" (p.42) and she is caught almost in an "emotional labyrinth" (p.43). She has never seen "such speaking eyes, with the power to open the door ways to other worlds." (p.41-42)

#### **Besides :**

He was a man, he was rich, he was abroad, what more did she need to know. The fuss she was making about her virginity was quite preposterous. (p.41)

But once he is sure that Rose is "in virtual control of the situation"

(p.41) and never deserts him, he tells her "in a natural everyday voice that he had a wife and an infant child" (p.43) in India. Without paying heed to Mona's anguish, he marries Rose in the same house but this marriage has no legality and religious fervour.

Wives for Ram are things to be used and not discarded but kept aside for future needs if any may have.<sup>5</sup>

Ram toasts life fully with his two wives, with Mona serving as the manager of the household and mother to his son, Dev, and Rose giving sensual pleasure and company in business, always showering love and warmth on him with not even a child of her own for any claim. As his friend Zafar rightly observes :

You have the path to heaven, all paved for you..with a cocktail party upstairs and a prayer meeting downstairs (p.72)

Love is merely a passing fad and act of entertainment for Ram. It is merely a passion and temporary refuge from boredom and loneliness. But it is the essential need of Sahgal's women, who expect it is the form of understanding, sharing and participation. For them, it is a means of self-gratification and sensual pleasures. He even claims credit to his extra-marital involvement. Here, Sahgal



raises the issue of bigamy, which, for Ram, is a comfortable arrangement on all fronts while it involves sufferings and sacrifices for the co-wives, Mona and Rose. Earlier, it is Mona who suffers because of Ram's love for Rose, and now Rose also suffers in a similar ways. She is totally helpless to do anything and "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" (p.105).

Though it is a fact that Mona is wronged by Rose, both of them are equally deceived by Ram, who does not consider age as a barrier for love and marriage. Not satisfied with his two marriages, he is again fascinated by Marcella, a highly cultured upper class English woman, and falls deeply in love with her. Without any feeling of guilt and without caring for the feelings of his two wives, "She and Ram had behaved like the rightful lovers making her, Rose, the outsider" (p.116). Ram says "he is attached to her intellectually" (p.226). So he seeks separation from Rose for the sake of Marcella.

His plans for his intellectual love of Marcella placing Rose on the pencil line between high crags again, the void falling away below.

He is "a hidden monk all the time, not seeking separation from Rose so much as a rest from domesticity" (p.215) which, Sonali calls "an exercise of sheer male prerogative" (p.215).

There has been "no real communication between Rose and Ram for Weeks.... Her anguish and rage fought for an outlet and gathered like a gale inside her" (p.104). Later, when she realizes that his affair with Marcella does not materialize, he comes home one night, "with no attempt to subterfuge, his footfall open and normal on the stair at three a.m." (p.104). She wants to give him "a furious shaking and ask him what he meant by this bland assumption that they would go on exactly as before as though there had been no break in their married life" (p.215). But she does not venture to do so, because having left her home country, career and independence, she feels that she has nowhere to go and so she compromises. Knowing Rose's emotional obsession with him, Ram cleverly starts exploiting her to his personal convenience. One night he tells her that "they needed to live separately for a time" (p.200) because "he wanted to keep himself free, so that he and Marcella could evolve the perfect companionship" (p.201). He further says, "She (Marcella) and I have so much in common... it needs to be kept alive. There is so much of intellect to link us" (p.201). "Rose, a victim of unthinking sorcery" (p.38) suffers an "Undeclared war around her" (p.59) in Ram's house, and passionately confides in her friend Buggs thus :

The only thing I could not bear in any circumstances would be a divorce... I could never bear to lose Ram (p.217)

All women are met with injustice in a tyrannical male world created by Ram, who is "moody and bad tempered" (p.44). First it is Mona, who suffers when she is discarded by Ram in favour of Rose. Later, Rose is cast aside when he develops a four-month long affair with the sophisticated and intellectual Marcella.

Ram always takes his wives for granted and does anything he is interested to do. His insensitivity and sheer callousness of temper to the sufferings of his innocent, meek and docile wives is seen at its best when he.

Spent a lot of time days listening earnestly to the woes of the first secretary to the Belgian embassy's wife, whose husband didn't understand her or any of their six children (p.183)

While saying that he has no time to go and see his own wife Mona, who is at her eleventh hour of life suffering from cancer. As Neena Arora rightly understands, "nor only love, even marriage has no power to blind man to the woman".<sup>6</sup> When Rose alarmingly informs Ram of his son Dev's misdeeds, she is at once hushed up with the sugar-coated glaze Ram had dropped over Dev :

My son had to be spoken in holy whisper. Never mind if he hijacked cars for fun, boys will be boys and they were returned to their owners in the end, weren't they? (p.180)

On another occasion when Ram is informed that his son Dev is abducting.

Girls from Miranda house at the University and taking them to private room at the Ashoka for a lark (p.180)

He says unworriedly, "These little escapades were part of growing up" (p.180) adding that "a man has to get his experience somewhere" (p.181). As, in Sahgal's early novel *The Day in Shadow*, where Som Raman tempts his growing son Briz with all worldly pleasures, Ram also encourages his son Dev by overlooking his misdeeds. Ram, in a way, passes on to his son, Dev, the qualities of male heritage to perpetuate the patriarchal values. He is, indeed, a typical representative of a world, which establishes man's superiority and woman's subordination.

Women in this novel, even after the marriage, are forced to play a meek and subservient role. For example, Mona, a typical conservative, traditional Punjabi, leads a cloistered life. She "believes in astrology and horoscope, which decided her marriage with Ram. She agonizingly feels that hers is a phantom presence in the house, remote unimportant" (p.103). When her husband has taken another woman, Rose, the three of them live together in an impossible situation that enters the realm of possibility (p.98)

She rants and raves into the night, lamenting her condition while 'Ram tossing and grumbling in his bed, would finally get up and go down' (p.60). She claims her husband for few minutes, an hour or a night. Her background makes her submit herself meekly to him.

Like a typical Hindu woman, Mona believes that she is protected by the "sacrament" (p.61) of Hindu marriage and she is secure in her status as the lady of the house. The traditional wife that she is, she keeps on praying and fasting "for her husband's long life and prosperity" (p.46), though she suffers many indignities with "loud insistent tears" (p.46) at the hands of her husband. As a mistress of the house, she instructs her servants to "feed beggars once a week" (p.46). Like Mona, Rose also suffers humiliation and hostility in the house of Ram as she is looked down upon as "an intruder and a usurper" (p.59). Ironically trapped by Ram, both the women start hating and cursing each other.

The turbulence of atmosphere in which Mona and Rose are helplessly caught is in fact a creation of Ram. Rose in her "foolish fancies" (p.97) endlessly, wishes :

That everything would work out all right if Mona, were dead. (p.97)

She even wants "to pack up and leave this wretched situation because of (Mona) her." (p.155). Ram, with his male arrogance, and selfishness subjects both the women to traumatic experience. He bothers little about their lacerated feelings. Both Mona and Rose feel terribly anguished and oppressed. The irony is that Ram, the real oppressor, goes scot-free taking refuge in the traditional sanction for bigamy. He considers it a male prerogative to love and marry any number of women. When Rose points out his "living with two wives" (p.60), he says, "My religion lets a man have more than one wife" (p.44). There are hardly any qualms of conscience in him. He further continues, good humoured and too lazy to quarrel.

Lord Krishna had three hundred. (p.60)

King Dasarath, Ram's father, had four wives. (p.61)

Muslims can have only four, at a time. We are more adventurous, even polyandrous. (p.61)  
He rules out giving up his first wife Mona, claiming that.

There is no divorce. Hindu marriage is not a contract. It is a sacrament.

**He even brazenly says :**

How does it hurt us, Rose to live upstairs and let Mona live downstairs? There must be cases like ours in this very city, though perhaps not so much on display. I know man who keeps his first wife and

five children in his village and lives here in town with his second wife, but everyone knows about the arrangement, so what is the point of hiding it<sup>3</sup> (p.60)

Both Mona and Rose are certainly aware of the injustice done to them by Ram but “habit makes them a willing prisoner in this world of exploitation and injustice.”<sup>7</sup>

Despite her unhappiness in marriage, Rose, after getting used to living with Ram all these years, cannot bear the idea of divorce. Mona at one stage is provided with a separate flat to live there as “an honourably retired wife” (p.163). So, both the women, with their traditional attitude to life, willy-nilly, accept the life of humility and self-adnegation created for them by Ram without any protest. He is a man of all “subtleties” and that his “behavior was enough to drive any woman up a wall”. (p.229)

A woman is chained not only by the institution of marriage but also by the bondage of motherhood. Feminists argue that a woman, after becoming a mother excessively relies on man both emotionally and economically. She, who enjoys a little amount of self-sufficiency in her married life, totally loses her identity, and she is relegated to the last married life, totally loses her identity, and she is relegated to the last position in the family, when she becomes a mother. As Juliet Mitchell understands, it is within the “role as mother and house keeper that woman finds the expression that is hers alone.”<sup>8</sup> A traditional woman regards motherhood as the greatest achievement because her identity largely depends on her producing a child, particularly, a male child.

Rose, “a failed womb” (p.181), has a strong desire for a child, who, she feels, is “the only sign here of a man and woman’s union” (p.70). When she first finds Dev, Ram’s son from his first wife Mona:

Turning himself over in his cot, crawling around in it, pulling himself up by its bars, rising sturdily to his feet and arriving in the garden (p.70)

She regrets that : She hadn’t performed the service for which women are intended.(p.70)

#### **She comes to know that :**

Without a child of her own, she would never be the mistress of the house, not even her half of it.(p.71)

She thinks that Mona enjoys the status of the mistress of the house, because she has given birth to a son and fulfilled her role as “a vehicle for the next generation” (p.70).

Ironically at the behest of her stepson, Dev, she is murdered by “a youth camp though suffocating her with a sack descending over her head, another pinioning her arms both of them carrying her out, where else but to the well where her body was found” (p.257).

In contrast to Rose’s desire for a child, we notice the rebellious feelings of Nishi at the time of childbirth. Nishi, “a doll faced girl” (p.183), from “a respectable family” (p.182), is found unable to protest publicly because of the glorification of mother- hood by Indian society.

The ideal of womanhood in India is motherhood that she doesn’t unselfish all suffering ever forgiving mother... mother is the ideal of life she rules the family, she possess the family.<sup>9</sup>

Nishi, for two successive years, delivers two sons that she doesn’t want. But she experiences the travails on both the occasions and faces the world for what it is. She says no one has cared to ask what she felt about becoming a mother. The novelist says :

Perhaps the time will come when it will be possible for every woman to regard the miracle of her child’s birth as her greatest glory and that can only happen when her consent and understanding are a part of the process.<sup>10</sup>

What Sahgal seems to convey through Nishi’s nightmare experience of childbirth is that :

Mother –hood need not appeal to every women as if it were the only natural consequence of womanhood<sup>11</sup>.



The novel is also all about Sati and about the self-assertion of Sonali, the new strongin dependent Indian woman.

My women are strivers and aspirers toward freedom, toward goodness, towards a compassionate world.<sup>12</sup>

Sonali comes very close to Sahgal's idea of woman. Sonali, a 38- year old IAS officer, is the studious daughter of Kesav, a retired I.C.S officer, who "comes from a family of feminists" (p.67). A conscientious senior civil servants, she falls prey to 'the crumbling un-professionalism that bowed and scraped to a bogusemergency'(p.36). She works as a joint secretary in the ministry of Industry but "hadn't merely been transferred without warning. She had "been demoted, punished and humiliated" (p.32), for writing an unfavorable note on the file of a Fizzy drink factory. Influenced by her father's commitment to freedom, she maintains that she has a mission to perform and console the "weaker vessels" Averse from prettying herself and becoming a sex object, she refuses to wear contact lenses and does not hesitate to conceal her lovely eyes behind a thick pair of glasses. "A bright thing", Sonali has a career for herself and has a mind of her own.

Through Sonali, the novelist presents the real position of women in modern India. Society generally expects a girl to get married irrespective of her personal feelings. "There was no getting away from marriage. It was what life was about, from Kabul to life in her own way. For this, she remains single all through her life because entering into a partnership with a man is submitting to him completely. She resents marriage. So, she says, "One reason why I never married was the weddings I saw as a child. I will never forget Bimmie's, who was only sixteen and still in tenth standard of the convent"(p.53). Her friend Bimmie on her wedding day is found with "manacled hands resting submissively in her red silk lap" (p.53) and she is turned into almost an "inanimate object" (p.56). She is shocked to find "other busybodies fussed around Bimmie, tilting her head, fiddling with her bangles and chains" (p.54) and Bimmie walks 'slowly as if she had grown old, her head hanging and her sari pulled down over her face'(p.54). Whenever her parents discuss her own marriage, she screams and shouts at them. She shows pity on the Indian woman, who is led to the institution of marriage quite against her will. She knows that her parents are waiting to catch her.

Like flying fish are caught when they leap up out of the waves, like Bimmie had been caught in midair tossing a basket ball into a net, waiting to say Ha! Got you! And turn you into a sweet and docile nature.(p.55)

As a woman, who has her own independent views on marriage and life, she never approves of any marriage performed "from top to bottom by caste community and background."(p.56)

Sonali is quite different from the traditional Indian woman. She goes to Oxford to escape from the world of arranged marriages, because such marriages have nothing to do with the desires and expectations of the bride and are done only to fulfill the job of the parents. Ravi Kachru, "a bureaucrat of importance" (p.14) replaces Sonali as joint secretary in the Ministry of Industry as he is "indispensable here, there and everywhere, the right hand and left leg of the Prime Minister and her household"(p.28). He and Sonali were born only four months apart "in the same room of the same hospital"(p.107). Ravi had been her childhood friends, a classmate and even, a lover at Oxford. They had been in love during their student days in England but differences in basic attitudes to life had driven them apart. In an intimate conversation, Ravi tells her that he had always loved her but that she had been "too brave""too bright" for him. Though she knows that being in love is a valuable experience, she answers him that she does not wish "any more to remark," (p.261) it as now she values her freedom more. A woman of this type Sonali is educated, economically independent, full of courage, self-respecting and capable of living by her own without compromising with state society or a man like RaviKachru.

In a patriarchal society, a woman is recognized and respected when she is with her husband. A single woman does not enjoy any position in society. Rather she is looked down and coaxed into accepting or surrendering to the man for his carnal pleasures. Hence, sati came into vogue. As an active observer, Sonali narrates the evil practices of sati, despite the regulation and abolition of it. She reads out the instances of sati only to show the heinous position of women. In one of sati files there were references to the minute dated 18 march 1827, signed by Lord Amherst. The “monstrous inhuman act” (p.136) of sati has made young widows sacrifice their lives along with their deceased husbands’ bodies on their funeral pyre. In almost all the instance, the young widows have been deprived of their inheritance. Therefore, Sahgal seems to say that it is not just legislation but a widespread social reform that alone can bring a change of attitude towards women.

What was needed was a crusade with all its passion and fever, generations of lawyers will uphold generations of laws but the old evils will go on into the twentieth and twenty first centuries because no torch has been lit. (p.136)

It is only women like Sonali, Who would try to light a torch and show the way to other women. Her references to the heinous practices of sati suggest that she is a modern woman “who is not born but has become one”.<sup>13</sup>

Sonali, for Sahgal, stands for modern Indian woman, who does not like to submit herself before man. As an independent woman, she is able to lead a life free from subjugation and subordination. Thus, the novel discusses the mental strength of women, their reaction to the society around them and their interactions with the people in the male dominant society. In a nutshell, this seemingly political novel has predilection and penchant for feminist cause, which is further, extended in her seventh novel, Plans for Departure.

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