

CHAPTER THREE

THE PORTRAYAL OF EMERGENCY

IN NAYANTARA SAHGAL'S

RICH LIKE US



The Emergency had given all kinds of new twists and turns to policy and the world's largest democracy was looking like nothing so much as one of the two bit dictatorship we had loftily looked down upon.

-Nayanlara Sahgal

3.1 Introduction :

Recreating and fictionalizing history is one of the popular trends in English Literature. Giving voice to the said and the unsaid stories of life, reconstructing the atmosphere of the past scenario is being experimented by many of the Indian Writers. Emergency is one of such themes. It has always been the subject of praise and criticism, its benefits and drawbacks varies the balance with the personal view. Many critics have projected Emergency as 'a thinly disguised masquerade preparing the country for family rule' (Sahgal; 1985 : 29). Nayantara Sahgal is not an exception. She is the second daughter of the freedom fighter Vijayalaxmi Pandit. Though being closely related to the illustrious Nehru family she impugns the dynastic politics of her first cousin, Indira Gandhi, through an examination of the Emergency and it's implications for Indian democracy.

3.1.1 Nayantara Sahgal : The Novelist and Her

Works :

Nayantara Sahgal, born on May 10, 1927 in Allahabad, is one

of the noted Indian English fiction writers today. She was educated in U.S. at Hellesley College (B.A. 1947). She is one of the Indian Journalists and novelists whose fiction present the personal crises in the lives of the Indian elite against the setting of political upheavals.

Till date she has published two autobiographies :

- 1] *Prison and Chocolate Cake* (1954) and
- 2] *From Fear Set Free* (1963)

Six Novels :

- 1] *A time to be Happy* (1958)
- 2] *This Time of Morning* (1965)
- 3] *Storm in Chandigarh* (1969)
- 4] *The Day in Shadow* (1971)
- 5] *A Situation in Delhi* (1977)
- and 6] *Rich Like Us* (1985)

Three Political Works :

- 1] *A Voice for Freedom* (1977)
- 2] *Indira Gandhi : Emergency and Style*
(1978) and
- 3] *Indira Gandhi : Her Road to Power* (1982) and

A Book on History :

- 1] *The Freedom Movement in India* (1970)

3.1.2 *Rich Like Us:*

A recipient of the Sinclair prize for fiction (1985) and the Sahitya Akademi Award 1986 *Rich Like Us* is set in the period from 1932 to the mid 1970s. It weaves together critical moments in Indian history : the freedom struggle, Indian Independence and partition and its aftermath. The pivotal point in the text is the Emergency (1975-1977) when the parliament and constitutional machineries were placed in the suspended animation. *Rich Like Us* (1985) interweaves the fate of Sonali, a young Indian Civil Servant, fed on the orgy of Idealism and Rose, a British woman. Sonali was unwittingly embroiled in a political controversy and faces a transfer on demotion to Uttar Pradesh. She reject to grant a license for a multinational Company's Fizzy drink called Happyola. It emerged that the enterprise was the result of a secret deal supported by the Minister of Industry. Dev Rose's stepson, a shrewd entrepreneur, is one of the local Indian partners in the deal. He forged his father's Ram N. Surya's signature

and had secretly withdrawn large sum of money to finance this venture. Rose suspects his duplicity and voices her anxieties. On realizing her suspicions, Dev arranges for the murder of Rose by the members of the youth wing of the governing party. The major characters of *Rich Like Us* are Individual, Symbolic and also representatives of their class and human condition in general.

3.2 The Portrayal of Emergency :

Sahgal, one of staunch critics of Emergency, has very objectively hinted at the action and reactions of the nation in the period of Censorship, discipline, midnight knocks and corruption, i.e. Emergency. Though officially everything was projected as well in Emergency, there was ban on parties like R.S.S. and Jamat-E-Islam and Public gatherings. People were trapped and dragged to the vasectomy centres like stray dogs, telephones were bugged... it seemed as if,

“a disguised masquerade to prepare
country for family rule.”

(Sahgal ; 1985 : 28)

Sahgal points out the scenario as similar to,

“... Nazi Germany, Papa said people used
to muffle their telephone with blankets
as a precaution against listening devices.”

(150)

3.2.1 The Civil Servants : Corruption and Uncertainty :

Through the experiences and with ironical comments of Sonali,
the chief narrator, Sahgal has sketched the plight of the civil servants.

She observes,

“No one wanted trouble. So long as it
dint’s touches, we played along, pretending
the Empress’s new clothes were beautiful.
To put it charitably, we were being realistic.”

(125)

Everyone in Civil service knew there was ‘no Emergency’, yet
they preferred being aloof from commenting on it.

Sahgal, in her Novel, deals with the aristocratic and upper-class

people. She depicts their political links and their manipulation of these links for their glamorous halo. She has very finely shaded the colours of corruption through the examples of Sonali, the Civil Servant and the joint Secretary in the Ministry of Industry. She was defavoured and and demoted from her post because, she had rejected one of the proposals which turned out as a secret deal supported by the Ministry itself.

“Instructions were that files had to move fast and on that morning, one month after June 26th, I wrote a brief rejection in the wide margin of the Proposal on my desk.” (25)

The deal was about a Fizzy Happyola drink factory. She was soon replaced by her friend, the chief explainer of Emergency, Ravi Kachru, about whom she says,

‘From the three on ten general rating most of us now gave him. Suddenly he was, indispensable here, there and everywhere, right hand and left leg of the Prime Minister and her household. And only partly because

he was a Kashmir and next door to
being her kith and kin.' (26)

Ravi Kachru, friend, former lover and now a colleague of Sonali was well aware of her feelings about Emergency and transfer on demotion. He regrets, but also tries to justify the uncertainty that was created during Emergency and their struggle to be in jobs :

“You have every right to be annoyed, Sonali.
I'm sorry they picked me to replace you,
and I know how you feel about Emergency
but all any of us have been doing is our jobs.”

(52)

Here, Sahgal shows how the Emergency scenario had given all kinds of new twists and turns to policy and has the world's largest democracy turned into nothing but dictatorship the nation had to grapple with.

3.2.2 The Constitutional Amendment :

The Allahabad High Court verdict went against Mrs. Gandhi. She was found guilty of corrupt practice in 1971 elections. This meant

her resignation; but she decided to be in power till Supreme Court's hearing. Meanwhile to stop the agitations against her, Mrs. Gandhi declared internal Emergency. Constitutional amendment was one of the chief steps taken by the government to strengthen her power so as to bring the country out of the chaos of agitations, but with public support, as Ravi kachru points out.

“Prime Minister not taking a single step without popular support... lawyers', teachers' entrepreneurs forums to provide solid public support for constitutional change to strengthen the Prime Minister's hands.”

(70)

Kachru explains that whatever constitutional changes were done was done to serve the nation, it was in favour of the masses. A lawyer friend of Neel explained Sonali,

“Madam had in good faith thought it her constitutional duty to override the constitution.”

(85)

He belonging to the new committed judiciary also gave his professional opinion,

“that the constitution would have to be drastically amended, if not rewritten, to give Madam powers to fight disruptive forces and crush the vested interests she had been battling against since infancy.”

(85)

Sahgal shows that though the rumours about constitutional change was to ‘make herself president’ (70) were in the air, professionals like Kachru, the chief explainer of Emergency and the lawyer had ably defended it for their own interests.

3.2.3 Detentions :

Emergency brought ban on the extremist parties. The midnight knocks and jailing of the political leaders and suspected though innocent was the general duty of the police during Emergency Raj.

The parties like R.S.S. Jamate-E-Islam, Marxist and their workers were on hit-list. They suspected even those people who had left these parties for years together. Not only this, rules were listed for selling of goods with individual price tags; shops were raided and inspected, of goods did not carry individual price tags then their owners were arrested and jailed.

Sahgal in her *Rich Like US* has projected the plight of the old people who had been in the business for generations and how the new law terrified them, Kishori Lal was one of such victims, Sahgal has embossed. He is bullied by the police.

“To see if I had the price tag on every item I was selling. But since I haven’t had the price tag on anything I have sold in the shop since the year 1948...Why am I supposed to have the price tag on every item now ?”

(75)

He argued with his daughter Nishi who didn’t want him to be trouble. She says,

“It’s the rule now, why not just do it ?”

(75)

She even convinced him that everything was alright with Emergency Kishori counter-questions her –

“For clapping a whole lot of people in jail ?

They nearly clapped me into jail...”

(75)

He doubted the intensions of the government who had projected JP as a raving conspirator.

3.2.3.1 The Academic World :

People like Kishori Lal were not the only victims of Emergency but also the people from other sectors of society. The educational atmosphere of the University was overshadowed by the Emergency. Every bit in the campus was examined and supervised by the spies of the Emergency. The entire Sanskrit department of the Delhi University was behind the bars suspecting them to be the members of

the banned party. Sahgal jolts down these atrocities in Kishori Lal's voice –

“They said on TV JP's a raving conspirator.
They need their heads examined.
Ofcourse I know with the entire Sanskrit
department of the University in Jail,
word trickles out.”

(76)

Professors were the second lot, students were the first priority, among whom few were opposers, few innocents and fewer were those who used to be the extremist but left the road for their studies and better career. One of the third category was the student whom Kishori Lal met in Jail, Kishori Lal asked him the reason that landed him in jail and found that he was there because of,

“... his membership of the Marxist party”

(185)

The student added,

“I had joined the Naxalites years ago,
but it never worked and I left
them and got down to studies.” (185)

While meditating over the two examples Sahgal reveals the atrocities done by the government against opposition. She mocks at the situation that landed these two innocents and others for their long back connection with the extremists and the opposition. Those connections which were cutoff from ages together.

3.2.3.2 The Brutal Arrests :

The innocents were detained in jails. Though the official version was –

“They said on TV prisoners
are being well treated.”

(75)

and “Prisoners are being very well
looked after.”

(75)

It was not at all true. Kishori Lal and the student were the burning representatives in the novel about whose activities Sahgal reports with her incomparable journalistic skill. The humiliating behaviour given to Kishori Lal and the student is registered by Sahgal. Through out the novel Sahgal points out the factual experiences of

suffering of the masses, who had been given no choice of articulation of their different view regarding the situation.

Kishori Lal, the old and the meek person, was jailed for being involved with R.S.S. years ago, he was brutally handcuffed by the police and was forced to accept the active membership of R.S.S. which he was not. His denial made policeman angry and he,

“... called him a liar and slapped K.L’s face, knocking him off balance so that he reeled and clutched the corner of the table for support.”

(169)

He was beaten up and locked behind the bars.

The police were even more cruel to the student. The students who were against Emergency tried to the good with the state police, when central police were called –

“The police are our brothers, the anit-Madam student movement in Bihar had chanted, we have no quarrel with them.

So central police had to be sent for to

do what the state police wouldn't
lathi-charge and tear-gas the
students and pack them to jail.”

(168)

While describing his acrobatic arrest to K.L., the students gave a detailed description of the University campus and the frightful atmosphere during Emergency. The police in civil dresses spied each and every inch of the educational area. Lecturers and students were their targets. Each and every one who opposed to Emergency was brutally axed by them. Students were caught like lambs and sheep. He was the student of Nehru University, which was finely combed by the police to arrest the Marxist students, but they not able to find him.

He one-day assumed that the arrests were over, came to the hostel room and got caught. He was severely thrashed by police, his legs got banged and smashed as he tried to protest. He had created much have which police would never forget. When he was brought to the police station and was asked to walk he thought,

“... it must be the end with a bullet
in my back like the Naxalites in
Bengal three years ago, bank, bang,
Bang as they walked in.”

(185)

Though, the student's leg seemed to be smashed and broken and K.L. was too old bear the humiliation they were not treated properly. They were not allowed to shave or wash themselves just because,

“... the authorities had decided to
demoralize them by not letting
them to wash or shave.”

(186)

3.3.3.3 The Condition of the Jail :

With the sudden proclamation of Emergency India faced a new phase. There were country wide arrests of political leaders and suspected. The police knew their duty; but jailers were unaware of

the treatment to be given to the prisoners of Emergency. The cells were small and were not sufficient to accommodate thousands of prisoners, as Shagal points out.

“Prison hadn’t yet become a planned routine, scientifically organized to receive teachers, students and shopkeepers.”

(187)

Obviously, jailor’s innocence turned them into ignorance about facilitating them with ample water, hygienic atmosphere in the jail. When K. L. was damned in jail, he found it as a stinky place with no proper light.

“A disgusting place this look-up.
He didn’t-mind the cramped closed quarter with no window to the outside world...
He minded the stink from the adjacent toilet over the knee high partition-filling air with its festering fumes.”

(171)

“The floor became hard and uncomfortable but curiously the stench from the clogged toilet across...”

(172)

While commenting on the jailers and governments who had no idea about the treatment to be given to the Emergency prisoners, she says-

“The government was merely authoritarian, not totalitarian so prison ways were still experimental, and naturally jailers improvised, invented took inspirational leaps and bounds.”

(187)

3.2.4 Emergency in the Rural Area :

Bond- labourers were abolished during Emergency but less emphasis was laid on its implication. On paper, the system was abolished; but, in practice, the loot was still going on. The Landlords in villages actually had not released their labourers and their

exploitation was on. They ruled the area and exploited the law in their own interest. Justice was not done to these labourers, as the police and the government favoured the Landlords. Emergency doubled the power of Landlords who had turned into politicians. This situation has been pathetically painted by Sahgal in her *Rich Like Us*.

3.2.4.1 Landlords and Police :

The handicapped beggar in the tomb near the RamRose mansion is the archytype of suffering created by Sahgal. Through him Sahgal peeps into the village life and the turmoil during Emergency. Sahgal has shown how the greed of getting full share of harvest from tenants had transformed the landlords into savages. The beggar while describing his tragedy narrates the details of the cruelty and injustice done to them. Police sent by the landlords came and plundered the stored grain, looted and smashed the utensils and to bring the crowd under terror burned the huts.

They didn't stop at that ; they caught the women, raped them and took them to brothels along the Ganges.

3.2.4.2 Tenants :

Disasters never come along, so was the case with the beggar. After losing his wife and the wealth of life, the share-croppers like him decided to harvest and have full share. This exasperated the landlords and in his wrath he decided to teach them a lesson. The landlord dragged two random samples; the beggar was one of the two. The landlord's men chopped their hands and dumped them. On hearing his heart rendering mishap, Sonali questioned the law that protected the tenants/sharecroppers.

3.2.5 Emergency and the Aristocratic Families :

Though Emergency was portrayed as a Millenium ahead by 'Mother Tsar' (Indira Gandhi, P.30) with her Twenty point programme and support rallies, it passed power into some unwanted hands like those of the Landlords in villages. The other higher class people used it for their own vested interests. Ravi Kachru, Dev, Neuman are some of the prototypes. Sahgal has focused on Emergency and its drawbacks. The aristocrats welcomed Emergency, as pointed out by Nishi.

“... this Emergency is what
we needed. The trouble makers
are in jail. An opposition is
something we never needed.”

(8)

The Minister who had come for the stone foundation ceremony of Dev's Happyola Drink factory portrays Mrs. Gandhi as a power that stood between 'Order and Chaos' (42); Chaos of agitations against Emergency.

3.2.5.1 Dev and Happyola :

After Mona's death her son from Ram-Dev-Stays with Ram and Rose. Dev who was good for nothing suddenly in overnight turns into a successful entrepreneur to the surprise of Rose, who wonders –

“What you call enter prennership,
how you pronounce it, is one minute
you're nothing and the next minute,
you're an enter-prenner and a bloomin

millionaire. Where has all the money
come from all of a sudden, I'd like to
know ? I like Maharaja's better."

(12)

In his passion to come to into his own, Dev turned ungrateful. His monster-like greed makes him withdraw huge sum from his parents' joint account by forging their signature. His overnight change makes Rose aware of her rights and security, her suspicions had not been baseless. Sonali in order to help Rose and stop Dev from further withdrawals meets the bank manager, who shows his helplessness by saying,

"I am a small man, you will
forgive me but these are not
normal times, I think you should
go to some higher up."

(158)

Happyola Drink factory was the project which Sonali refused to sanction and got demoted. It was the project in which the Mistry was interested and under its name, illegal dealings and storage of car

parts and money were to be done. The Prime Minister's son was interested in this business.

Rose was the only obstacle in Dev's way of complete possession of the wealth Rose, though less educated, was rich in common sense. She had also become somewhat dangerous for Dev's political career. Her common sense, made her suspect the famous people's car project and she began to air her suspicion before others. She unwittingly came to know from Nishi that the underground bomb-shelters were really meant to store black money-

'Coming from the dummy companies and
dealers who are going to exhibit
the car when some models are ready'.

(208)

and also to store car-parts arriving from abroad, straight from the airport without clearing customs. While commenting on Dev mention of nationalizing the indigenous car project launched by Madam's son for which parts had been imported from abroad, Rose sarcastically says-

“Sound like the emperor’s new clothes
to me. First of all there’s no car and
then you nationalize the one there isn’t ...
OO was suppose to be producing this
famous car him (i.e. Madam’s son)
or the Japanese?”

(207)

Dev fumes ove Rose’s behaviour and decides to put an end of her life by having her bound and thrown into a nearby, well by one of the ‘toughs’ of the ‘youth camp’.

Rose’s murder was declared as suicide and no one doubted the explanation given by Dev and Nishi, his wife. Sonali, baffled with anger, preferred to be quiet. She meets the beggar whom Rose had promised to give artificial hand with Sonali’s help. He had witnessed the murder and was scared for life.

Ravi Kachru, who tried to speak with Dev about the forged cheques on Sonali’s request, loses of the favour of the establishment and under the threat of being shunted from Delhi.

All the hurdles of Rose, Ram and Ravi were handled and cleared brilliantly by Dev. Dev gets appointed as a cabinet Minister and he celebrates it on the very day of morning for Rose. It was Ravi Kachru who put Dev close to the VIP's. Yet, it was Emergency that made Dev a VIP and brought him close to the throne. He guarded the royal secret of foreign car parts. This gave Dev a bullying power and confidence.

Sahgal, with the example of Dev shows how the so called elite of the time had used Emergency as an axe against others and who came in their way and got protection from the establishment.

3.5.2 Nishi and Her Circle :

Nishi, Dev's wife had come from a middle class family. She was fond of Rōse and respected Ram. She was responsible for bringing Ravi in contact with Dev. She helped her husband in business and later in politics and believed in him. She was the one who arranged the delegation that came to congratulate Mrs. Gandhi Sahgal ironically observers,

'And the emergency was so popular
you could tell by the delegations of teachers,
lawyers, school children and so on and
so forth who went every day to congratulate
the Prime-Minister for declaring it...'

(81)

Nishi had full faith in whatever newspapers and T.V. announced during Emergency. She, with the help of Ravi Kachru, worked as an instructor for Twenty-point programme in her locale, she thought that emergency was 'comforting' the nation:

'... the emergency made the country
as comforting, where Nishi had no doubts.
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 a Taiwan or Singapore'. (73)

She took groups to congratulate the Prime Minister, plant trees and prevent servants from having children. She has invited the ideas to popularise Emergency in one of her meetings where the topic of family planning was raised.

3.5.2.1 Sterilisation Programme :

Sterilisation Programme can be taken as the climax of the Emergency Raj. Authorities and the upper-classes were worried about the growing population in the society other than them. They used every possible means to sterilise the meek. Shagal has realistically portrayed this Showbiz attitude and such concerns of the elite,

“Brith control. We’ve got to take out cue from the government. I have it on reliable authority ... That’s the kind of business like programme we’ve got to start for domestic servants and no nonsense about it”. (78)

Sterilisation was discussed in clinical manners. The discussed how to manipulate the oppressed class with threats.

' "I've threatened my ayah with
dismissal more than once if
she produce another child but
she goes on popping brats.
This is her fourth ...'
"Get her tubes tied".'

(78)

Arrangements were made to carry the servants to the
sterilisation centre.

3.2.5.2.2 Castism :

Though these aristocrats were sure to sterilise their domestic
servants, they were well aware of their beliefs. Hence, each tried to
protect his own servants. The upper-class was aware of the riots
against vasectomy. Muslims and Christians opposed it and it would
have been the height of folly to start sterilising them. Hence, they
decided,

'... let's get started with Hindus.

Let's just get on the job to show,

We meanⁿ business' (79)

While sketching the character of Nishi and her friends, Sahgal does not spare even the slightest shade of the upper-class mentality during Emergency. The excess of the sterilisation programme is shown through the example of Kumar, an old servant of Nishi's father's age whom Nishi wanted to get sterilised.

Sahgal has minutely described the impact of Emergency on the echelons of the society. The sane turned into insane in this raj in this Raj in this cutthroat struggle of proving identity in the government of the time.

3.6 Conclusion :

Sahgal, in *Rich Like us*, deals with aristocratic people's view during Emergency. For them, it was just what we needed' as it banned strikes and other such headaches. For Sonali, it was 'no emergency' Dev and Nishi took it as time available for getting settled as an entrepreneur, Rose was worried about her survival and self-respect which was axed by Emergency, which gave Dev power to deroot her. Ravi Kachru and the lawyer friend of Neel represent the group which tried to walk in the middle of the road and get favoured all the time.

Sahgal is an established creative writer and a columnist of Indian journalism. Her novel *Rich Like us* pursues the ramifications of the Emergency across diverse Socio-economic, racial and intellectual background. She has stressed the objectives and the functioning of the Emergency, its effects on the lives of common people. Neluka Silva observes,

‘Sahgal is particularly skilful in conveying to her readers the oppression of such ordinary people as the beggar’s wife and other village women who are raped by the policemen, and the mutilation of the beggar himself. Such stories enable the reader to share the acute sense of despair and frustration experienced by the victims of authoritarian politics’.

(Internet)

Sahgal has divulged the exclusionary character of nationalism, and its division of citizens according to their allegiance to the state with the examples of the sterilisation campaign and slum clearance.

With her monolithic vision, she has projected the violation of fundamental human rights by the state as patriotism.

The novel is not only concerned with autocratic leadership but also with the Emergency that plays a determining role in the constitution and transformation of identity. Sahgal by conjoining the narratives of her protagonists has endeavoured to find a meaning for the vicissitudes of modern Indian State.
