Nayantara Sahgal

II.1 Gin, Evening Parties and Cockney Accent

As Teresa Hubel pointed out in her clever analysis of the complicitous connection between writing activities and the consolidation of certain forms of power, both "*Rudyard Kipling and Jawaharlal Nehru (...) stake their claim to the ownership of India by the very act of writing about it*"[138]. Certainly, to link a colonial writer and the architect of India's self-definition as a social democracy would displease both, but the point here is the political implication of writing as the means to communicate one's project for the community, claiming knowledge and authority over it[139]. After the independence of India, in 1947, writers had the challenge to "stake their claim" on the newly born state, projecting their hopes, ideals and fears into it. Nayantara Sahgal certainly did her part.

Nayantara Sahgal is the most conventional case of committed writing among the three selected Indian novels, but her realist and chronologically linear novel is not the least interesting to read, when compared with the baroque creations by Arundhati Roy and Githa Hariharan.

The fact that Sahgal was a niece of Jawaharlal Nehru had an influence on her interest in politics and on her firm commitment to the socialist ideal for India. That she is a brilliant writer is a lucky coincidence for someone who was in a privileged position to look at political developments in post-independence India.

Rich Like Us (1983) is a daring novel about the Emergency Period (1975-77), a controversial moment in Indian politics. Sahgal's open disagreement with the Emergency regime of Mrs. Gandhi (actually, her first cousin) is partially framed by the fact that Sahgal, a committed socialist, is writing against the capitalist invasion of India. Another point that opposes Sahgal to the Emergency regime is the subtle transformation of the latter into a clear dictatorship, the excesses of which Sahgal intends to denounce. This political tension is translated into a fictional argument constructed around a sense of deep crisis, which is the way Sahgal represents the 1970s India.

In an economic essay on "India's Public Sector", Baldev Raj Nayar[140] provides important background to understand what socialism meant in the Indian political scene of the eighties, around the time Sahgal wrote her novel. After independence, Nehru dominated India, and he saw socialism as the only way to fight back both imperialism and mass poverty. Nehru's firm commitment to socialism left an ideological legacy that defined any opening to foreign investment as a "*betrayal*" of the national project for India, a "*sell-out to monopolies*"[141]. When Sahgal writes Rich Like Us, in 1983, Mrs. Gandhi has returned to power for a second term, and it is in this second term that she really parts with socialist views for Indian economy. While writing about the Emergency as a dictatorial regime disguised of democracy, Sahgal is criticising the beginning of the capitalist turn in Mrs. Gandhi policies, and beyond that, her abusive behaviour in 1975-77, regarding censorship, imprisonment of political dissidents and massive sterilisation campaigns. At the time of its release, this novel must have been quite a polemic text. Currently, it still shines for its style and intelligent reading of India's postcolonial politics.

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[138] Teresa Hubel, Whose India? Leicester University Press, London, 1996:1.

[139] Teresa Hubel means the appropriation of India as a territory of the imagination disputed by colonial/imperialist writers, reformers and nationalists: "whoever defines India, whoever speaks to and for its people, and whoever imagines its destiny with the hope of determining its future can be said to have a part in it." *Op. cit.* 1996: 1.

[140] Baldev Raj Nayar, chapter 3, *in* India Briefing 1992, Leonard A. Gordon; Philip Oldenburg, (eds.), published in Association with the Asia Society, Westview Press, Boulder, San Francisco, Oxford, 1992.

[141] *Op. cit.* Nayar, 1992: 77.

The Emergency period started overnight. On June 12, 1975, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi was found guilty of charges of campaign malpractice by Allahabad's High Court. This conviction prevented Mrs. Gandhi of "*running for or holding any elective office for a period of six years*"[142]. Politicians and newspapers demanded that Indira gave up her post as Prime Minister, organising a huge demonstration against her on the 25th June. In that same dawn, on the 26th, 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 twenty-eight and the twenty-ninth amendments to the Constitution, Indira retroactively exonerated herself from impending legal charges, declaring this amendment immune to Supreme Court 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 Sahgal's novel, 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.

Sahgal wrote a book about her cousin Indira Gandhi's rule over India[143] in such a way that makes clear their divergence of views concerning what the nation should be. It is worth quoting the introduction to Sahgal's book on Indira Gandhi, to settle their divergence in point of view, as Sahgal herself phrases it:

> "The essence of Indian politics before her (Indira's) time had been diversity of opinion, institutes and channels for its expression, and a wholehearted acceptance of the nurture of these diverse strands as essential to the democratic faith and system (…). With Mrs. Gandhi, this atmosphere, along with the political structures it involved, the climate of debate and dissent it had encouraged (…) began to be eroded. A simple formula of for-and-against, either-or replaced it."
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> (1978: 1)

Through her novels, Nayantara Saghal writes her own project for the postcolonial life of the subcontinent, "writing" the nation in the sense Homi Bhabha meant it, that is to say, as the promotion of a set of pedagogic discourses defining collective identity. According to Indira Gandhi's formula you are expected to conform. In contrast to such "*simple formulas*" as the ones defended by Indira Gandhi's dictatorship, the plot of Rich like Us contains different points of view, and Sahgal constructs characters both for and against the Emergency. Through their disagreement a rich and complex picture of the Emergency Regime is composed.

The novel opens with a third person narrator following the thoughts of Mr. Newman, the Western businessman attending a dinner party offered by his new Indian partner, Devikins (Dev). Within the structure of the novel, it is logic to start with this "gentlemen's agreement" for the understanding between Mr. Newman and Devikins (some kind of illegal and extremely profitable business) embodies everything Saghal is writing against. The title

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[142] Wolpert, Stanley A., A New History of India, Oxford University Press, London and New York, 1989. All historical references were taken from this author. See also Burton Stein, A History of India, Blackwell Publishers, Oxford, 1998.

[143] Nayantara Sahgal, Indira Gandhi's Emergence and Style, Carolina Academic Press, Durham, North Carolina, 1978.

of the novel itself is explained in two related passages connected to Mr. Newman's impressions of India. In the first of these passages, the reader follows his point of view of "happiness as profit", which is presented as the standard Western mentality:

> "The first thing those local elites do - not to mention their presidents or generals or whoever is at the top - is to get themselves the biggest, latest model foreign cars', he had been told in his briefing before the trip, 'and why not? We like the way we live. We can't blame them for wanting to live like us. Besides, it's what makes them ready to buy what we have to sell". (1987: 9) [144]

This paternalising, profit minded perspective expressed by Mr. Newman frames the attitude of India's postcolonial government under the Emergency as a late case of "Western-philia", where the ideology of the ruling class is a replica of colonial assimilation: they just want to be "Rich Like the West". The problem is that in order to allow a few to be rich like the West, ruling elites seem poised to sacrifice the rest of India, and Sahgal is not willing to go along with this project. She stakes her claim on another kind of India, shaped by a socialist project adapted to the realities of the subcontinent. The novel Rich Like Us is Sahgal's way of "writing the nation" composing, through her critique of capitalism, a resisting, anti-imperial argument against unmonitored foreign investment. Thus, the protective border Saghal envisages around India, is not necessarily aimed against "foreigners", but rather directed against corrupted political elites (home colonialism) without whose support, aggressive neo-colonial practices would never take hold of the subcontinent.

Devikins, a caricature of the new capitalist entrepreneurs, is totally lacking in character and skills, and were it not for his connections "at the top" he would hardly deserve being taken seriously. However, protected as he is by powerful people, he becomes very dangerous for those around him and under him, exactly as dictatorships are hurtful for the people living under them.

The novel is more or less a chronologically linear narrative, concerning Devikins' affairs with Mr. Newman, regarding the construction of the Happyola factory. The irony in the echo of "Coca-cola" suggests America as the partner of the Emergency project, and the suggestion is consolidated by the fact that Happyola is also a fizzy drink. The production of the fizzy drink is a cover up for an underground warehouse to hide imported car parts and engines. The connection between illegal business and the complicity of the government is established on two grounds: Devikins becomes extremely powerful and successful the moment he gets "*a contact in politics*", materialized in Ravi, the bureaucrat. Secondly, there are scattered references in the text to the pet project of Mrs. Ghandi's son, which is to build a car with "all India" components[145]... The novel is a narrative of the unclear and surprising way this business is put together and its effect on a handful of characters. In order to make her pro-socialist, anti-capitalist point, Sahgal tries to inscribe in her text the human cost, as discarded side effects, of business "at the top". Hence my claim that Sahgal portrays India as a state under a sort of home colonialism, whose freedom and borders still are at stake.

According to Devikins, the villain in the plot of Sahgal's novel, Emergency certainly "*is good for business at the top*"[146], since "*troublemakers are in jail*" and "*an opposition is something we* (Indian elite businessmen) *never needed*". This self-confident, "I know my business" rhetoric is in total contradiction with Dev's real abilities and qualifications. Ironically, through flash-backs (introduced in the narrative as memories of Devikins' wife,

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[144] I am using the page numbers for the Sceptre edition, British Library, 1987.

[145] Actually, this fact is a sort of national joke in India for it is widely known that Indira Gandhi's son, Sanjay Gandhi, was the top manager of India's automobile manufacturing industry…which took five years to produce its first car (*op. cit*, Wolpert, 1989: 394).

[146] *Op. cit.* Sahgal, 1987: 10.

Nishi), we learn that Devikins is totally incompetent as a manager, letting the standards of quality drop and being despotic towards his workers. In fact, it has been Nishi who keeps trying to save the family business (RoseRam Fashions), which Devikins has inherited from his father, and which Dev dismisses as not profitable enough. As a type of the modern Indian entrepreneur, Dev wants nothing less than being "really" rich, in the Western, capitalist way, so, he disregards small profit, hard working, traditional manufacturing industries. In stark contract with this mentality, the defence of traditional Indian business is, actually, an important sub-theme in the novel, being one of its anti-neo-imperial arguments.

In comparison to the kind of postcolonial literature written at the time of the independence struggle, the postcolonial literature written a few decades after independence, as is the case of Rich Like Us, has this feature: its main anti-colonial arguments no longer are directed at the (now, absent) colonial state. Through social criticism, second generation post-independence writers are rather resisting the current corruption of the independence ideals and the behaviour of their governments. This is a line of argument that I encountered in other postcolonial novels, for instance from Mozambique and Angola. What is at stake is the accusation, formulated by a critical, committed writer, that India was being managed for the advantage of a capitalist class, breaking with the direction and the ideals of Nehru, who was determined to ease poverty in India. Through the socio-political analysis of India offered in the plot of the novel, this study encountered a new role for postcolonial literature and settled one of the forms of evolution in these new literatures, as more mature social criticism replaces the nativist or nationalist euphoria of the literature written to support the independence struggle. This new function, gives new breath to the range and relevance of such a critical frame as the postcolonial one.

The motto of Sahgal's villain, Dev (Devikins) the arch-capitalist, is that "business is business". This matter-of-fact attitude, justifying corruption or irresponsibility as a matter of necessity, works as an excuse to disregard the negative social consequences of profitable business, as, for instance, when the perfect piece of land to build the Happyola factory happened to be a "*rural belt* **requisitioned** *from the villagers*"[147]. The business agreement settled during the evening party (first scene) sets the tone for the rest of the novel, for a competition is established between two rival orders of values, namely, profit and humanism. The gravity of the choices impending from the outcome of this contest gives the novel its depth and relevance.

Aesthetically, Sahgal balances her quite blatant political criticism with literary elements that make of the novel an interesting artistic piece, thoroughly weaved with structural rigour and deep sensitivity. Probably, the greatest asset of the text in terms of style is the caustic irony in Sahgal's tone, which makes the text thoroughly enjoyable and effective, while the risk of sounding moralistic or too overtly pedagogic (the problem of texts too dependent on political propaganda) is avoided. Another striking element in Sahgal's narrative technique is the masterful construction of complex, three-dimensional characters. Devikins is the only type/typical character, and that is a statement in itself concerning the superficiality and banality of the elite businessmen. Even Devikins' closest ally, Ravi, the bureaucrat, is much more developed as a sort of anti-hero, and he is kindly given centre stage from the first scene. Sahgal does not refrain her admiration for his skills:

"Across the table from him (Mr. Newman) sat the latecomer, a bureaucrat of importance in the current set-up (...). Experience had taught Newman that key figures were never to be underestimated. They had to excel at something, if only at the art of survival through changing times,

[147] *Ibid,* Sahgal, 1987: 15.

directing the beheading of queens, the guillotining of aristocrats and entire revolutions, and when the pendulum swung, ushering in imperial pomp and dynasty with the same superb savoir-faire."

(1987: 15)

Ravi supports Mrs. Gandhi ("*imperial pomp and dynasty*") with the same vigour he had displayed in his commitment to Marxism while studying in England. He is a key piece in the chess game opposing socialism and capitalism, and his choice of allies will have direct consequences for the other characters in the novel, a fact that makes him directly responsible for unfortunate events. This is a stern point. Yet, the plot of the novel includes a moment when Ravi is given the choice between helping friends (Sonali and Rose) and keeping his state of grace in the eyes of "the top". At this stage, Ravi chooses to risk (at least) a delay in his career, and this choice partially redeems him. Such episode is relevant because it inscribes the possibility of a halt in the complacence or complicity of bureaucrats towards a regime that is becoming destructive and damaging.

I take Ravi as the best example of Sahgal's ability to construct complex and enticing characters because he is not one of the main characters, he features in few scenes, and his "presence" is remarkably strong, exactly as it had to be, since Ravi embodies the presence/absence of the regime, always discretely, transparently "there". Though Ravi is a sort of cynical mastermind, shifting his allegiance from socialism to capitalism so as to adjust to the dictatorship, Sahgal manages to make him equally seductive and surprising for the reader, who will certainly fall for his/Sahgal's "*superb savoir-faire*".

Narrative control is equally very clear in the way Sahgal unfolds her plot. This is a well-told tale, albeit along traditional lines in terms of narrative structure. The way the first scene holds all the sub-themes developed later, is evidence of this structural control and narrative skills. For example, in order to illustrate the problematic situation of India during the Emergency, Sahgal introduces, still in chapter one, two essential elements in the construction of her resistant/anti-imperial argument: the socially concerned citizen and, secondly, a tradition of respectable businessmen who traded with the West without "selling India" (that is why I said above that Sahgal is not defending the economic isolation of India). This last argument shows Sahgal leaves room for private initiative and individual entrepreneurs, but respecting "India's ways". First, let us consider the socially concerned citizen.

In chapter one, in the evening party offered by Devikins, the reader is introduced to Rose, old, "*hair dyed a peremptory scarlet*", one too many glasses of gin, a strong cockney accent, the reigning "mother-in-law", since she is the second wife of Devikins' father. A few months before this evening-party, Ram had a stroke, and he has been in a sort of coma, leaving Devikins to ruin the family business. Rose's position as reigning "mother-in-law" is uncertain. The moment Ram dies she is not welcomed in her own household, without his protection. Devikins is the son of Ram's first wife, and he never forgave his father his preference for Rose. To make things worse, Rose has got an inconvenient sense of justice and a natural born talent to ask the questions no self-respecting capitalist wants to hear...

"Don't long-time-ago me. What you call enter-prenner-ship now, or however you pronounce it, is one minute you're nothing and the next minute you're an enter-prenner and a bloomin' millionaire. Where's all the money come from all of a sudden, I'd like to know? I like maharajas better.'

'Really, Mummy, what's the connection?'

'Least you knew where the loot came from."

(1987: 12)

Certainly, not the best comment while sitting at the table that celebrates a dubious agreement between a bureaucrat, a foreign businessman and a ruined misanthrope.

Rose's comments and questions are very important because her point of view voices the side effects of the business agreements being settled. Note for instance that it is Rose who leads the reader to consider what happened to the poor people who were living in the piece of land where the Happyola factory is going to be built. The fact that Rose has got a working class origin is presented as the factor making her instinctively aware of the point of view of the underprivileged, turning Rose in one of the most generous and aware characters in the social world represented by Sahgal. Furthermore, Rose's friendship with both the crippled beggar and Kumar (her servant) constitute unwavering evidence of Rose's ability to connect to people outside of the privileged social circle she is moving in, after her marriage to Ram. This awareness and concern make Rose stand in a clear contrast to the rest of her family: her step-son Devikins and his wife Nishi.

Rose not only points out the social cost of business at the top but she also introduces the second point in Sahgal's argument against capitalism, namely, the existence of successful "Indian" ways of making business. Rose's memories contain an alternative (masculine) role model to handle business and profit, in the way Ram (her husband), and in his father before him, did:

> "Take my father-in-law. 'E never saw a contract in 'is life. Couldn't speak a word of 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. Anyone who wanted to do business with 'im came and sat on the floor, English people an' all, and did it 'is way."
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> (1987: 13)

The self-assertion of India's identity implies a denial of India's colonial servitude to the West, hence, the importance of keeping Indian ways to create a frame of identity outside of the ex-colonisers ("*English people and all*") dismissive views of India's habits. This is a reversal of the typical colonial situation in which educated Indians wanted to be replicas of their British colonisers. By wearing only home-spun cloth, Gandhi was making visual a political idea, embodying it. The point was that India's elite had to return to Indian values. The necessary reversal of colonial Anglophilia (which in theoretical terms amounts to the revisionist, deconstructive dimension of postcolonial literatures) was the spirit of the "Swadeshi movement" started by Ghandi, the aim of which was to "*Indianize India*"[148], promoting "Indian made", buying "Indian", and boycotting British products. While instigating India's self-sufficiency, Ghandi was asserting an Indian national identity, creating distinctive borders between British citizens and colonised citizens. In short, Gandhi was creating the idea of Indian nation-hood in the heads of people. Significantly, Sahgal represents this return to "Indian culture" as a central project in the vision and hopes of the young (socialist) politicians of post-independence India: they were going to start a "*new tradition*"[149].

In current (nineties) Indian politics, this revival of Indian traditions is more identified with right wing, fundamentalist discourses concerning the assertion of regional and caste identities. But at the time (seventies), the echo of the Ghandi/Nehru project still had the leftist hedge inserted by the latter. Before independence, all the nationalist rhetoric leading to the demand of "self-rule" was heavily dependent on "Indian ways", Hinduism and Hindu life style, epitomised in Gandhi's clothes and austere life-style. The excessive focus on

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[148] *Ibid,* Sahgal 1987: 25.
[149] *Ibid,* Sahgal 1987: 28.

Hindu culture was one of the reasons for the alienation of Muslim sectors of society, which led to the traumatic process of Partition and the birth of Pakistan.

The Emergency certainly shattered the socialist hopes of a part of the local intelligentsia when they realised that a different kind of "tradition" was about to be implemented by the Indian state. This perspective of the emergency is focalised by Sonali, the first person narrator, with whom Sahgal clearly identifies. Most of the narrative actually turns around Rose, Sonali, and their friendship, while the lives of these and other minor characters are set against the background of the Emergency as a crisis period.

Sonali, a socialist, secular minded character (and high caste, Kashmir, Brahmin) is the Joint Secretary of the Ministry of Industry and she takes her job very seriously. According to Indian laws, she rejects the proposal to build a factory to produce a "*fizzy drink called Happyola*"[150]. The reader knows it is Devikins' factory, and that to produce the drink is not its real aim, but Sonali is not aware of the undercover bonds between this project and "the top" power. Since the project does not fit the directives of the Indian state she rejects it. A few days later, an amazed Sonali is suddenly fired, and replaced by no other than Ravi, the bureaucrat. Only when she is dismissed does Sonali have the courage to look back and take in the discrete dictatorship that is actually ruling the world's "*biggest democracy*". For Sonali this is the moment to wake up from the "*conscientiousness of civil servants*" which "*knows no bounds*"[151]. Her whole socialist ideology is shaken down, as a volatile dream, and the shock is made all the worse by temporary sickness and depression. By coincidence, Sonali, who had been dismissed for rejecting the Happyola project, ends up in the foundation stone ceremony with Rose. It is through Rose that Sonali suspects something else is going to be produced in the factory...

As a socialist herself, Sahgal narrates through Sonali her own cynical awakening for the reality of Indian politics. In the structure of the novel, the moment Sonali loses her innocent belief in the prominence of socialist ideals for the Indian state is a key scene. That is the moment she diagnosis the coming crisis in the post-independence Indian state as the deviance from an ideal agenda, previously set at the independence moment. Against this ideal, the Emergency features as a post-utopia regime, with no room for committed intellectuals like Sonali/Sahgal.

Like Rose, Sonali is a socially concerned citizen, with the ability to connect to other people outside of her privileged family/caste circle. The difference between the two of them is that Sonali takes in the crisis of the Indian state on another scale, as it fits her educated political awareness.

Sahgal represents the Emergency as a faceless, omnipresent power that inspires fear and awe (if you focus on the amazing possibilities open to those who change unconditional support for power and favour). "Madame" has a "club" of followers (that is how Sahgal puts it) who will get rich, but who have to stop thinking critically, actively, and morally. The dinner party at Kiran's home (Sonali's sister) is a typical example of this uneasiness with power. Several members of the "club" are gathered there, all of them with good prospects, if they do not dare to raise opposition or criticism. This makes conversation artificial and empty. Kiran carefully speaks, exclusively, of her cuisine and the ingredients that were used in the meal, while the professor, the editor and the lawyer (significantly nameless, for it is their function in the "club" that counts) only praise the regime, leaving Sonali to consider that "*the room should have swooped and spun with contradictions*"[152] but, India was ruled

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[150] *Ibid,* Sahgal 1987: 30.
[151] *Ibid,* Sahgal 1987: 58.
[152] *Ibid*, Sahgal 1987: 94.

by a "*Mother Tsar whose ignorant little peasants were quite happy with mother's blessing*"[153].

One of the "little peasants" is Nishi, Devikin's wife, a contrasting character to oppose to Sonali and Rose. She is more than willing to do everything to please "the top", and, consequently, push her husband ahead. Nishi is thoroughly committed to pro-emergency activism since this will grant her social status and *Madame*'s sympathy. She wants to send her servants to sterilisation campaigns, take part in organised visits to display popular support for *Madame* and organise the movement of the "*New Entrepreneur's Wives' and their Twenty Point Programme*[154]. Underneath this very opportunistic attitude, Nishi turns out a more complex character than the simple "snobbish doll" she looks. A powerful fear moves her, fear for her father, who stubbornly wants to keep his independent mind and his political distance from the regime. Nishi is convinced that the regime will protect her from the poverty she knew in her childhood, and, through her husband's success and money, she will be able to protect her father from himself.

KL, Nishi's father, is another piece of evidence concerning Sahgal's very special talent to design characters. Old, tired, half indifferent to politics, half ironical to the banalities of life, KL sees his shop, where he sells bathroom equipment, as a bitter joke on Gandhi's supposed concern for untouchables. For centuries, untouchables have been cleaning toilets and other people's dirty laundry as it fits their polluted caste. Flush toilets are KL's personal revenge on the caste system and the definition of untouchability. The moment modern toilets step in, the activity that defines the occupation, and hence the polluted identity of untouchables, disappears automatically. Through this philosophical view of his toilets, KL is underlining how easy it would be to finish caste traditions and their definition of social borders if high caste people really wanted to change social differences in India. In spite of his sharp perception of the ironies of politics, KL is not an activist until the moment he is arrested and mistreated in jail, without any formal accusation. He so firmly believes in his innocence that he thinks his imprisonment is a mistake that will soon be clarified. However, a young, wounded, college student his brought to his cell. He had been summarily arrested and thrown into KL's cell, probably with a broken leg. The solidarity KL feels for his young companion awakes in him a new fighting spirit.

This part of the plot, when the reader is given a view of how the Emergency worked, arresting people without a formal accusation or proper trial, often with physical violence showered upon demonstrators, is a good piece of evidence to show how literature, in spite of being fiction, can open new doors to search for information from a more aware starting point, sensitive to possible facts, less innocent.

When Nishi manages to get KL's release from jail through her government contacts, KL suddenly breaks the logic of these repressive politics, becoming, at this moment, a model of fighting spirit for the readers. Instead of going home, thankful for being released and promising himself never to mess with politics again, he makes an unexpected choice:

> "He couldn't go home with them as there was a young prisoner with him in his cell whom he couldn't leave. Nishi would have to get the boy released as well and they would leave together. Rose discovered it was a student with a leg that may or may not be fractured but needed immediate medical attention. We'll make arrangements for him, she offered with a confidence she was far from feeling, but KL made no move to get up. I have this fear, he patiently explained, of the gates clanging shut behind me and the boy remaining here, perhaps for years, so I can't go till he can come too."
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> (1987: 240)

[153] *Ibid,* Sahgal 1987: 95.
[154] *Ibid,* Sahgal 1987: 86.

The “illumination” that strikes KL in his prison cell, and makes him a heroic, exemplary model, becomes a firm commitment to teach and train younger people politically, which means that it is precisely the measure of repression KL was exposed to in the process of his imprisonment, that made a political activist of him. At the end of the novel, his situation is not solved yet, but Nishi will certainly not give up, and the release order has meant an immediate improvement on the treatment of these two prisoners, with obvious connections “to the top”.

While Sonali is the reader’s guide to the shift from democracy to dictatorship in Indira’s government, the student and KL are important characters to expose the repressive facets of the emergency, and its damaging impact on people’s lives. KL is the first character in the plot to reach a resistant, fighting awareness, though Rose and Sonali have enough critical spirit to become ones.

I have no claim in making Sahgal stand for actual history, but I can assess her view of history implied in her representation of events. In the above interpretation of the novel, I have been looking at plot and characters as terms in the construction of a perspective that frames a set of ideological arguments.

In relation to the category of national self-definition, as a set of discourses to define a collective project for the post-independence state, Sahgal’s text suggests that the future of India should be an Indian version of socialism, combining Marxist ideologies and Indian production realities like the traditional manufacture of luxurious cloth, on small scale enterprises, run by a joint family.

The novel presents resistance to neo-imperialism/ globalisation as the main challenge to keep the government of India focused on the need to improve the living conditions of its own people. According to Sahgal, the degree of this resistance diminished dangerously during the Emergency period, a political tendency that led Sahgal to write a novel on the lack of responsibility of Indian businessmen and changing policies, since these are offering India to foreign exploitation. Sahgal leaves the reader wondering if India is reverting to a sort of colonised state, exploited for the advantage of a few, who exchange allegiance to foreign powers for personal wealth and privilege. While formal colonial history is, in this novel, a problem of the past, neo-colonial influence and home colonialism are current problems, taking a greater hold of India. As a form of resistance to this state of affairs, Sahgal promotes individual responsibility in the project of asserting Indian independence from international capitalism.

Rich Like Us provides several representations of cultural identity, as one of the strategies to make more concrete the above mentioned “Indian ways”. However, there is a tension between a global socialist project for India and the defence of its traditional communal identities. The serious problem with the latter is that the self-assertion of India as a nation is cancelled by its fragmentation across regional identities, since caste and regional references take precedence over national or state issues. Next to kin, the community overlaps caste and ethnicity, invoking a territory and a history, a language, food habits, dressing codes, marriage possibilities, friendship and preferable business contacts. All these distinctive codes and borders define a real “club” to protect local aristocracies and the hierarchies under these. Hence, Sahgal would contradict herself if she were to endorse these privileged caste/communal identities at the same time that she advocates the importance of a national socialist project for India.

Being the writer she is, Sahgal found ways to go around these apparently irreconcilable aspects. One of them is to represent communal identities in an ironic, light

tone, as if not taking them seriously, while she is not really confronting them either. The obsession with the assertion of cultural identity and other markers of difference is portrayed as an exaggerated snobbery. Nevertheless, the sense of pride and belonging implied in the recognition of one's extended community prevents the development of a functional sense of citizenship which is necessary to inculcate a stronger commitment to the Indian state, and, according to Sahgal, to socialism. Thus, state and community are rival frames to define one's collective identity. Under the Emergency this contradiction is settled because being a Kashmir Brahmin means to be entitled to rule the state, making of the state one of the privileged properties of this aristocratic community.

Secondly, as a new concept to articulate Indian identities, Sahgal clearly opposes traditional communal references to a cosmopolitan India, embodied in Sonali, Rose and Ram, the new identity models for the modernisation of India on a competitive, but socially responsible, basis. The cosmopolitan identities she constructs are high class, however, these new subjectivities are hybrid products, of a particular type, and it is through this hybridism that Sahgal draws her path between self-assertion, nationalism and socialism. In order to illustrate this point, let's discuss... love triangles.

The love triangle Ram, Rose and Marcella is an important representation of hybridism, in which a cosmopolitan education brings together educated people in a way that deconstructs and revises colonial representations of white superiority.

Ram is a cultivated, refined Hindu, dealing with European imported articles, and later on (after Swadeshi and the "buy Indian" turn), exporting India's luxury manufactured cloth. When visiting England on a business trip, Ram meets Rose. A seduction game ends up in a more serious infatuation and Ram brings Rose to India with him and marries her.

Rose's life in India is a long process of partial assimilation, confusion and undecidabilities while Rose tries to manage a functional fusion between being British and Indian, white and Eastern. By the end of her life, Rose realises that even in her small everyday gestures a part of her has learned to be a Hindu wife: "*The last resistance of Rose's English legs eased and she found herself as relaxed as a yogi in her cross-legged posture, her thoughts beautifully clear*."[155]. More important evidence of Rose's integration in India is her friendship with Mona, the first wife, after years of rivalry. Their joint search for a bride for Dev, and Mona's mourning over Rose's parents (killed in an air raid during world war II) are two sensitive episodes, masterfully selected by Sahgal to illustrate the depth of their bond. The evolution in the process of Rose's adaptation and integration in her Hindu family is an example of possible negotiations between hybrid identities.

This subject is quite important in postcolonial literature, and has emerged more clearly after the independence struggle. In a first moment of self-assertion, the representations of the nation tended to project purist, homogenising images, denying internal fragmentation and multicultural rivalry. Eventually, history made these factors catch up with postcolonial self-awareness, unfortunately through civil wars in several countries of Africa and through riots and post-Partition[156] trauma in India. As a reaction to this rivalry and fragmentation, Sahgal presents love affairs, friendship, and intimate scenes from everyday life as evidence of the fact that people from different communities have taken pleasure in being together. This pacific co-existence is expected to cause reflection on the necessity of violence.

The first example of an attachment that transgresses communal and national rivalries concerns British, gorgeous, working-class Rose who marries high caste, educated, Hindu,

[155] *Ibid,* Sahgal: 1987: 248.
[156] Partition is the historical name referring to the division of the subcontinent into India and Pakistan.

Ram. The difference in their education turns out a source of pleasant teasing and, on a metaphorical level it also amounts to a revision of British colonial and racist discourses. Ram's education and refinement deconstructs the myth of white superiority, because it is education, and not race, that frames this difference between them. The reversal in colonial prejudice becomes more obvious since it is Ram who corrects Rose's English:

> "'Ow d'you mean, court me proper?
> '-ly,' he corrected.
> 'Oh you, teaching me my own language. What'll you be teaching me next?"
>
> (1987: 41)

Since Rose learns Hindu ways and Ram is constantly quoting Western cultural references from the Greeks to Henry VIII's table manners, Sahgal represents in these characters the possibility of an effective hybridism. While Rose is important to deconstruct colonial racism, Ram is an example of cosmopolitanism, and neither a British education nor a British wife did make of him "less Hindu"...

Sahgal thus surpasses race through education, and adjusts tradition to pragmatic politics, cutting short both colonial discourses and their reversal, sectarian obsessions (a sort of nativism). It is this same pragmatism, in the hands of socially responsible citizens that Sahgal envisages for India, parting with other forms of racial and caste allegiance in so far as these interfere with the best organisation of the Indian state.

However, there is a point in which her anti-colonial, pragmatic position is not tenable: Sahgal does not contain the inscription of a certain amount of Anglophilia and class snobbery in the construction of Marcella, Ram's great love. In this case, the characters' class affinities bring them naturally together, and working class Rose realises she cannot compete with a love that "is meant to be". Because of Marcella, the class difference between Rose and Ram eventually becomes a site of tension, which they only handle because of Marcela's departure and Rose's determined choice to stick to her Indian life.

The difference between Anglophilia and hybrid cosmopolitanism is, in my interpretation of this text, a matter of degree. Both Ram and Marcella are cultural hybrids, mutually fascinated by each other's world, but, the representation of Marcella as the perfect example of "*the civilization that had produced her, matchless in the Western world for its unbroken continuity*"[157] goes to the extent of an awed fascination for British culture. That is why Marcella, as an embodiment of British culture and history has to be a "larger than life" character, actually, a sort of mythical Guenevere:

> "Her face was the face on tapestries it took months to embroider in the Middle Ages. Its features had a clarity and purity human features don't often retain. All it needed was the medieval gown and headdress, sleek hounds and horses, chivalrous attendants and a flower-strewn foreground to make it a priceless Gothic heirloom."
>
> (1987: 262)

On the contrary, when speaking of certain aspects of Indian culture, Sahgal seems to suspend her defense of "Indian ways", suggesting that some aspects of dominant Indian mentalities should be reformed:

> "But why did you have to talk such rot about many-armed goddesses?' I said.

[157] *Op. cit.* Sahgal 1987: 264.

‘Populism means using symbols the people understand. What’s wrong with it?’
‘And her father, and her son, a regular Holy Trinity?’
He shrugged impatiently. ‘Why not? We believe in Family.’
‘We believe in sati too. We’ve got to stop believing in certain things.”

(1987: 173)

“’We’re doomed for reasons like Rama’s cruelty. We revere the Ramayana and worship a man who turned his wife out alone and pregnant into the forest. Not even ordeal by fire, proving her purity saved her. How am I supposed to know what’s right for me to do - whose “side” I am on, as Rose says - if even what we worship needs second thoughts?”

(1987: 67)

Sahgal’s defence of hybridism and reformed traditions as alternative elements to reconstruct a sense of collective identity in postcolonial India is meant to overcome India’s internal fragmentation across a diversity of communities. This point is made most clearly in a small episode where the co-existence of Muslim and Hindu identities is represented through the friendship between two men. Even the physical description of Ram and Zafar makes them mixed and inter-changeable.

“What could possibly pry them apart? They could be blood brothers, she thought, tall and aquiline, unhurried, unhurriable, handsome, conceited, lovable and insufferable in all the same ways. (…) If Ram was a Muslimised Hindu, Zafar was a Hinduised Muslim. So what was all the shouting about?”

(1987: 72).

This question has got serious political implications since communal rivalry between Hindus and Muslims has repeatedly led to riots and bloodshed, especially at the time of the traumatic partition of India and Pakistan, in 1947. Jinnah, the ideologue of Pakistan, claimed that Hindus and Muslims belonged to two different religions, had different social customs, different philosophies and cultures, rarely mixed or intermarried and, undeniably, constituted two nations. His party, the Muslim League, welcomed the idea of a Muslim nation, and it is because of this lobby that, before independence from British rule, the one-nation or two-nation (partition) possibilities became the vortex of polemic political debate and social unrest. In fact, communal rhetoric touched on highly emotional issues, and, in the final year of the British Raj, Hindu and Muslim civil populations killed each other on the streets of the main Indian cities in such numbers that one can call it an “unofficial” civil war.

Sahgal addresses these painful memories in her novel, and she clearly states her disagreement with Partition. She sees it as an unnecessary trauma, affecting the lives of thousands of people who were displaced, leaving behind the gains and projects of a lifetime (not to mention those that were killed in riots along the border line). Sahgal cannot accept the cost of partition for common people (for instance for the character KL, in his shop, trying to earn a living after having lost his entire possessions back on what became “*another country*”), on behalf of an unsustainable rivalry that she completely erases from her representation of India[158]. Instead, she inserts in her text, scenes of friendship and unity between the two communities. Together with Ram and Zafar’s friendship, an important detail to assert the possibility of unity, already at the stage of the struggle for independence, was the routine at Lalaji’s[159] prayer meetings to support Indian independence: he read pieces

[158] In the nineties, news of communal violence still is frequent and horrifying. On this subject see “In Defence of the Fragment” by Gyanendra Pandey, *in Representations*, University of California Press, number 37, 1992.
[159] This character was Rose’s old father-in-law, the father of Ram.

from the Gita, the Koran and the Bible. By mentioning this wise and eclectic attitude, Sahgal is, once more, signalling the existence of better ways to share the subcontinent among different communities. This respect for diversity is in total contrast with the spirit of the dictatorship.

Above, I said that there were two passages that explained the title of the novel. The second one will be useful to close this sketch of the postcolonial arguments in Rich Like Us. When Mr. Newman, the Western businessman, drives home after the evening-party just offered him, he almost runs over a beggar, a crippled, skinny figure looking "*more like an insect than a human being*". He breaks, frantically. Inside the stopped car, for the first time, Mr. Newman questions the human price India may be paying "to be rich":

> "If they'd do like we do, they'd be rich like us, his briefing had suggested. Eleven thousand miles distant it sounded (…) unbelievable in the monstrous heat."
>
> (1987: 16)

The reason why it is "unbelievable" is that capitalism in India is creating a system that will not bring about development, or better living standards. It is creating a second *Raj,* only this time the colonisers are not the British, but local elites. "*It is their Raj*"[160]. The reference to the "monstrous heat" invokes India's "otherness"/distance, its specific geo-cultural context, which makes a positive replica of Western policies totally unbelievable, as unreal as the beggar looks to Mr. Newman's eyes. How can India be rich while denying the pressing social problems (poverty, disease, social exclusion) it has to handle? It would be like denying India's unbearable and undeniable heat. Even Mr. Newman wanders about the legitimacy of his capitalist prospects.

Rich Like Us is a novel that falls into a line of writing described as realist and nationalist by Mukherjee[161]. In this case, India is already an independent state, but Sahgal is struggling for its definition as a socialist, modern democracy. Since the Emergency is a period of crisis, the definition of the Indian state is back to an open-ended, "after crisis" foundational moment. Hence, the realist aesthetic in Sahgal's writing. The centrality of such themes as history and economic processes fit a linear, realist time structure. Similarly, the most obvious choice would be for a kind of focalisation that is more centred around external spaces and events than on the internal lives of the characters. This is a major difference between this text and the other two Indian novels that I am going to discuss here. The texts of both Arundhati Roy and Ghita Hariharan are more dependent on internal psychological processes.

Another important reference to affiliate Sahgal's text to an Indian literary tradition is the Progressive Writers' Association, which resisted imperialism and fascism. The members of this association sent a manifesto to the second congress of the International Writers' Association, held in London, in 1936. This manifesto, which was signed by Rabindranath Tagore and Jawaharlal Nehru (among others), defended a commitment of Indian literature to social critique, claiming that literature should "*deal with the basic problems of our existence today - the problems of hunger and poverty, social backwardness and political subjection*"[162]. The influence of this important movement in the arts remained present after the forties and fifties, and it was affiliated to the left, to the cultural wing of the communist party. I think the discussed novel embodies the aims and the definition of literature implied in this famous manifesto, which contributed to the consolidation of Indian modern literature.

[160] *Op. cit.* Sahgal 1987: 257.
[161] *Op. cit.* Mukherjee, 1971.
[162] Tharu and Lalita (eds.), Women Writing in India, Pandora Press, London, 1993, Vol II: 80.

II.2 Feminist Priorities

The choice for discussing here, from a feminist point of view, the work of such a writer as Nayantara Sahgal has got special implications. Sahgal is looked up to as one of the main feminist writers in India, and she has admitted her preference for focalising politics through the experience of living "as a woman", which is to say, through the construction of women characters in interaction with the private and political dimensions of varied systems of power[163]. The visibility of Nayantara Sahgal in the literary universe of India is only matched by Anita Desai, Sashi Despande, Rama Mehta or the poet Kamala Das. Recently, during the nineties, other new names have emerged, like Arundhati Roy and Githa Hariharan, but Sahgal is one of the leading names of an older generation. She was one of the few women to be awarded the Sahitya Akademi (1986), the highest literary prize in India, precisely with the novel I am analysing here, which testifies to the recognition of its relevance and impact inside India. Rich Like Us is Sahgal's eighth novel, and together with a critique of the Emergency regime, it addresses a very serious and urgent set of feminist issues.

Sahgal's representation of Indian society takes for granted the active role educated women are expected to play in politics, business, management and economy. However, Sahgal equates the possibility of women's professional participation in any sector of activity, and the corresponding possibility of liberation, with the accompanying development of a socialist project for postcolonial India. In this way, Sahgal links the historical processes set in motion with the transition to an independent India to a deep social transformation, which would naturally have effects on women's condition, as well. Indian postcoloniality thus amounts to an open project, where new roles for women should evolve together with a more general change in Indian mentalities. It is in this sense that one of the main characters, Sonali, remembers her father's vow of confidence on the dawn of independence: "*Women like you, are going to Indianise India*"[164], meaning, in this context, the re-creation of an independent Indian identity, free from British colonialism. But, it also means that educated, trained women were undeniably expected to have a role in the reconstruction of India's renewed identity, and one that was not contained within the domestic sphere.

On a meta-level, it is important to point out that the above "*vow of confidence*" for the future of post-colonial India is coherent throughout the whole novel. The confluence of colonialism and female oppression makes the formulation of the project for a postcolonial future the ground for the liberation of women. Nevertheless, this argument runs the risk of presenting postcolonial independence as a process of loss of tradition, often interpreted as a loss of cultural identity, especially under the light of nationalist mentalities. Apart from the influence of conservative sectors of society, nationalism must have been a highly inflammable subject in postcolonial India as part of the consolidation of its post-independence identity and, moreover, after the Partition of Pakistan and the emergence of the Sikh secession movement. How to defend a reform of women's roles, being critical of India's traditions, without seeming anti-nationalist? Sahgal is careful to specify in several passages of the novel, often through the two main women characters (Sonali and Rose), that she defends an adapted kind of socialism, integrated with India's ways. This leaves the negotiation of India's role models within the frame of political organisation. The link to the postcolonial context of India is made via the fact that historical changes imply transition

[163] This idea is the gist of Sahgal's presentation in the Encyclopedia of Postcolonial Literatures in English, Eugene Benson and L.W. Conolly (eds.), Routledge, London and New York, 1994, vol.I and II.
[164] Nayantara Sahgal, Rich Like Us, Heinemann, London, 1983: 28.

moments, and these tend to be prone environment to try reforms. Within the frame of Sahgal's arguments, the contradiction between changing sexist traditions and the assertion of India's cultural identity would be settled by socialism because this ideology expects from women a modern, active participation in society, meaning the socialist "nation" would automatically settle women's issues.

But the socialist option does not correspond to the glimpse of postcolonial India represented in Rich Like Us. Instead, the Emergency holds on to traditional mentalities, and explains why India's fragmented social landscape will probably remain unchanged among high caste communities, like the Kashmiri Brahmins. The links between caste and power, being caste inherited by birth for males and by marriage for women, explains the strength of gendered codes. But first, and following Sahgal's guidance to learn "India's ways", let us look at the options open before high caste women.

Sonali is one of the main women characters in the novel. The construction of this character, an alter ego of Sahgal, is defined by contrast to traditional models of feminine identity. It is in relation to Sonali's unorthodoxy that the direction of the post-independence change regarding traditional feminine identities in India can be discussed. While following differences between Sonali and other women characters like Mona, Nishi and Kiran, one is settling the traditional gender norms that are expected to accommodate these changes.

Sonali is a high caste, Western educated woman, who used to be Joint Secretary of the Ministry of Industry. Her serious commitment to socialism has prevented her from sensing the change in the political climate around her, and only when she is dismissed, on account of unclear political influences, does she realise that she is out of tune with the new political priorities for those in power. Her brilliant career is presented in opposition to marriage, which actually is a very traditional prejudice on Indian culture, as if women had to give up on one of the two spheres. Still, what Sahgal seems to be saying in this text is that if that is the case, so be it: it is precisely because of the cultural logic opposing marriage to career, pervasive in more conservative views of Indian womanhood, that the moment young Sonali decides to study hard is the moment this same character senses she wants to "opt out" of marriage. The whole episode is presented lightly, as an anecdote, which confers to it an elegance it otherwise would not have had if it were to be engulfed by an exemplary tone. Yet, the "option" between being married by one's relatives or investing in one's personal projects is a key issue in the promotion of feminist awareness, especially in the context of high caste Hindu families who traditionally married their daughters very young, investing less in women's high education than they could afford.

Sonali recalls the wedding of her friend Bimmie as a moment of self-discovery, regarding what is expected of brides and women:

> "Kiran and I followed her into the room where the bride waited, looking like a tent. I couldn't see her face under the crimson and gold sari pulled so low over her forehead, (…) But I was hypnotized by Bimmie's nose ring, the sandal paste dots on her face, eyes downcast, and those manacled hands resting submissively in her red silk lap. This was never Bimmie. "Hey Bimmie!" I hissed. She looked up and it was her in the tent and the chains and the dots, nobody else. Wails welled up in me, erupting like claps of thunder into the room. "You'll get a good trashing when I get you home, Sonali, I don't know what's come over you."(…) The busybody bustled up. "Your turn will come, little darling, never worry," while other busybodies fussed around Bimmie, tilting her head, fiddling with her bangles and chains, stroking her cheek, praising her sweet, docile nature, which made it clear they new nothing about Bimmie and had captured and tented her by mistake. My wailing protest did nothing to keep Bimmie's future at bay."
>
> (1983: 54)

This passage is a good example of Sahgal's talent. One almost forgets that this is a construction of a bride stereotype. Sonali's hysterical reaction to this stereotype, spells out her refusal to conform. As for Bimmie, the bride, she is portrayed as a passive, submissive character, objectified as an ornate "tent", and expected to be docile and sweet. The fact that Sonali no longer recognizes her friend in the comments of other people around her, suggests a process of annihilation in the bride's identity. She is no longer Bimmie, an individual, but a bride-stereotype, with the adequate attributes: chained, captured, manacled. Sonali's tears are a mourning behaviour, mistaken by eagerness to play her part in the "natural" order of things. As a reaction to this destiny, Sonali was driven to "*frantic competition, to stardom in my studies, to deliverance from suitable "boys" and marriage, abroad*."[165]

"Running away" from marriage, and traditional femininity, can be considered a measure of luck for some (like independent Sonali) but it is a tragedy to the eyes of most traditional Indian families. However, even the most orthodox mentalities are willing to accommodate a husband-less relative, if there is a career, and power, to make up for that abnormality. My problem with the whole idea of "opting out" of marriage is that many women would not be allowed to opt, and one should not underestimate the power of family pressure, habit and social prejudice to make young women accept to do what is expected of them. Besides, in many cases, economic means to pay for an education are not available.

For the other Indian women characters of the novel, who are pleased with their wifehood and motherhood, Sonali is beyond their small world, and hence, beyond their sympathy. When Sonali is dismissed from her post at the Ministry, Kiran (Sonali's sister) is only concerned with finding a solution to get Sonali back to good terms with "the top". Kiran, like Mona or Nishi, stands for traditional femininity, and she has no thoughts to spare concerning the whole arbitrariness of this abusive affair. In Kiran's head, the world is the size of her caste and family, and "power makes for deity", which means that mature, critical socio-political awareness is replaced by allegiance. As long as the "club" stays tight around Madame (Indira Gandhi), nothing will hurt them, or those they care for. Like Nishi, Kiran only judges the world from the point of view of the convenience of her small family/caste circle. Any sensitivity concerning Sonali's professional pride and her ethical disappointment with the system is beyond Kiran's more domestic mentality.

Not much support in the male world either. In a well-intended effort to console a brooding Sonali (after her dismissal from office and hepatitis) her doctor voices a common-sensical misogynous notion, which I have encountered frequently in many of the Indian texts I have been reading. It is the praise of women's resistance and endurance, as the qualities that enable women to survive within the frame of their (female) condition. Being a woman, though ill and cut off from a brilliant career, Sonali is comparatively well off and she should be pleased with her luck:

> "When I was a child, I remember my mother getting up at 4 a. m. to walk with the other women to the well to fetch water. Then she got down to the housework, grinding spices and the rest. She had seven children, unassisted. Three of them died before they were a year old. I remember her after one of her pregnancies, leaning out of bed to stir the *dal* on the stove. The kind of life that makes for courage."
>
> (1983:34)

Sonali naturally does not have patience for this kind of comments. She knows very well she has suffered a great injustice, and it is the standard to judge what women can endure that is wrong. Survival is not a satisfactory standard to measure the respect of a society for

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[165] *Ibid,* 1983: 57.

human rights, and women are not naturally entitled to less self-fulfilment and more hardship than men. By creating a character like Sonali, who is very critical towards established views concerning high caste (Kashmir, Brahmin) Indian femininity, Sahgal is suggesting new patterns of feminine identity, more attuned to citizenship, professionalism and social responsibility. These are the alternative notions of womanhood, which she opposes to the patriarchal/marriage/domestic discourses, felt as self-annihilation and imprisonment, within the frame of caste codes and family hierarchies, which make of women an "inanimate object"[166].

One of the most interesting aspects of Rich Like Us is Sahgal's crafty ability to establish links of necessity between traditional role models, social intolerance and the process of fabricating regional/caste identities ("*We were Kashmiris, and Kashmiriness is the more powerful for inhabiting a territory of the imagination*"[167]). Distinctive behaviour, disciplined by ritual, and its companion worldview (pedagogically inculcated from childhood), with a corresponding system of beliefs and values, is the material ground to assemble a sense of collective identity, and make borders between communities a reality. Kashmiriness is acquired by birth or/and marriage. Consequently, marriage agreements between lineage families are political contracts, on which the future of the community is gambled. It is a medieval system in which women are exchanged through the males of an allied group as means to strengthen collective solidarity and bonds. A side effect of these strong communal identities is intolerance and rivalry towards others. Sahgal tries to de-essentialise these identities by including in the social world of her novel affective transgressors like Zafar and Ram, respectively Muslim and Hindu, who, through their friendship, prove that the two communities can live together in deep complicity and affection. Ironically, the two friends claim the same historical forefathers as everybody else in India ("*You mean you're descended from the Greeks? And the Afghans, the Turks, the Mongols and the Persians, and not necessarily in that order*"[168]) thus denying racial/blood grounds for communal rivalries and their distinctive borders.

Apart from the clear effort to overcome Muslim/Hindu rivalry (a serious intra-national problem in the subcontinent), Sahgal focuses her deconstructions of caste identity on her own caste, Kashmir Brahmins. Kashmiriness, in the novel, is equated with aristocratic power over India, encompassing "*the tiny wee handful whose uncles and aunts all knew each other and who are in charge of everything without a notion of what 'everything' really is*"[169]. This ironic view of the bond between power and communal aristocratic identities explores the pathetic in non-democratic arrangements. Ravi's best career move was the marriage to the "*youngest daughter of the second cousin of the Prime Minister's mother*", matching "*caste, community, features, complexion, height and width*"[170]. Sahgal represents caste identities as the wrong basis to judge suitability for leadership and management by treating irrelevant things very seriously ("*height and width*"?), and basic requirements, like awareness concerning India's problems, as something that is totally irrelevant for the matter. From this surreal point of view, it makes sense that "*aunts and uncles*" do not have to know anything about the country they are ruling: they just have to be Kashmir Brahmins.

In spite of her sardonic jokes, Sahgal does not suggest any particular agenda to promote inter-caste marriage, nor does she represent any kind of negotiation between traditional femininity and modern wifehood. She simply suggests that women should take

[166] *Ibid,* 1983: 56.
[167] *Ibid,* 1983: 55.
[168] *Ibid,* 1983: 73.
[169] *Ibid,* 1983: 113.
[170] *Ibid,* 1983: 171.

their careers seriously, "opting out" of marriage. This is a relevant agenda, but a very strict one, which ignores other social classes and does not reflect on intermediate possibilities. How many women in India can afford to "opt out", apart from a very privileged social circle? And how many would not simply prefer more comfortable terms (regarding rights, status and self-esteem) to share a married life? Still, the whole discussion on the connection between power and caste aristocracies is one of the sub-themes that run through the whole novel and this is a relevant subject to define the position of high caste women as objects of exchange between the members of a male alliance. Marriage and women's sexuality are strictly controlled in such a patriarchal system and I can imagine that deviance from established role models will be ruthlessly repressed, since it stands on the way of sheer power[171]. On the other hand, the novel also inscribes room for a certain freedom with youth infatuations, if they happen with one of the members of these communities "*whose aunts and uncles all know each other*". This may seem a little step. It depends from which (more or less puritanical) point of view you determine what is acceptable. The worth of the feminist agenda entwined with the exemplary deviance of such a character as Sonali is that it promotes the liberating idea that a woman has the right to move away from the domestic, family minded sphere, engaging herself in professional life and the acquisition of qualifications.

This focus on individual identities, does not deny the hold of collective practices. In the previous section I have talked extensively about Rose, the British second wife in Ram's household. I will return to her now to discuss another set of problems that high caste women have often faced. Although Rose always helped her husband in the shop, she has been a "wife" all her life, sharing her husband Ram with his first wife (Mona) and his lover (Marcella). Rose has suffered her share of insecurity as a barren, foreign, British wife, thrown into a Hindu household, but she managed to be accepted, and even esteemed. On his part, Ram has been, for decades, a fascinating and alluring presence, but he had a stroke, and has been in a coma for months. The moment the plot of the novel starts to unfold, Rose is living with her step-son Devikins and his wife Nishi, in an uncertain wife-widow-mother-in-law position. The relationship between Nishi and Rose is agreeable, although superficial, but Devikins has always resented Rose's presence as the cause of his father's emotional distance from Mona (Dev's mother) and from himself, their son. When Ram dies, Devikins certainly does not plan to give Rose her fair share of his father's fortune and the text offers ample evidence of his dishonest character since Devikins has been forging his father's signature so that he could dispose of his money. Without Ram, Nishi and Devikins will be Rose's only relatives, and this is far from a soothing thought. Rose's material dependence on Ram and Devikins reproduces the actual situation of many Hindu wives in spite of the Hindu Code Bill.

In 1956, the Hindu Succession Act granted female children equal claims with male siblings to inherit property. In 1957, the Hindu Code Bill established the rights of a widow over inherited property, on an equal basis with other relatives (actually, the Right to Property Act, from 1874, granted a widow's life interest on her husband property). The problem is that progressive laws are one thing. Private family arrangements concerning property are another. Very often, without the support of, at least, a part of the family, a widow's destiny can be destitution. Through one of Sonali's memories, the text mentions the "*shaven-headed*

[171] The only example of transgression in the novel, Sonali, who "opted out" of marriage, had the constant support of her father. Hence, this is not a scenario where codes of social control would be activated since authority is compliant with the transgressor.

little girls wrapped in grimy saris" who "*waited for leftover food to be thrown to them from the saint's kitchen. Child widows. Their karma. Nothing to be done*."[172]

Rose fears her destiny may not be very bright after Ram dies, and she asks Sonali to get her a lawyer. When Sonali tries to approach a lawyer among her friends, she is given the hint that no lawyer will dare to fight Devikins, obviously one of Indira Gandhi's "protégés". Everybody's opinion is that since Dev "*is doing splendidly*", "*it would be better if she came to an understanding*"[173] with her step-son. Sonali insists with her friends on the necessity of a legal arrangement but the problem is that Dev has been nominated for "Chairman of the New Entrepreneurs" and nobody would like "to upset", the new, blooming millionaire.

This episode is very meaningful to denounce the cancellation of legal procedures in the name of family "convenience". The uncertainty of Rose's position poses a social problem which, in India, is neither rare nor hidden from public awareness. The marginalisation and abuse of women inside a family cell, which is outside of the effective reach of the law, is a current fact. In order to press her point further, Sahgal actually ends the novel with the murder of Rose at the hands of her step-son's men. Obviously, Rose's death is reported as an accident (she fell in the well and drowned), closing the possibility of any police investigation.

Another gloomy clue to understand women's risky position within the frame of traditional conventions, hidden in the privacy of their homes, is provided by Mona, the abandoned first wife, who attempts suicide. When the doctor arrives, the family provides the same excuse (as in Rose's case) to prevent further enquiry: what happened was an accident; the oil lamp of the prayer table fell, and Mona's sari caught fire. The suicide attempt fails because of Rose's quick intervention, and from that day on, Mona and Rose re-discovered each other. A new love finished with the rivalry over Ram, and Hindu Mona truly accepted British Rose as her family. This happy turn in the plot of the novel does not prevent Sahgal from having induced reflection on alternative explanations for domestic "accidents", in India.

Sahgal's serious exposure of cultural traditions that can be lethal for women proves the adequacy of literary criticism to provide insights on real problems, even though they are addressed through fictional representation. Another topic proving this point is the discussion of *sati* (widow immolation), although Sahgal represents it as a problem of the past. Still, she denounces *sati* as "murder", claiming for the present time a huge dimension of national guilt and self-awareness. The advantage of confronting this past is to secure greater public awareness of violence against women, so has to stop with the invisibility, or denial, of these problems. The main chapter on *sati* (number eleven) goes back to 1829, the year of the legal abolition of such practice, by the British Raj. The action goes back in time through a manuscript, written by Sonali's grandfather, in 1915 (this manuscript is presented as evidence of the willingness of some Hindu citizens to finish with such practices themselves, which is an important detail to bear in mind from a postcolonial perspective).

The first thing Sahgal denies about *sati* is the widow's supposed consent: they were often sedated and drugged, which is why there were no screams when they were dragged to the pyre, making the victims look complicitous with the sacrifice. Secondly, Sahgal goes on to describe how some of them actually tried to run away from the fire. The fact that she presents these narratives as quotes from pieces of news enhances the link between social realities and fictional representation. This is a strong narrative piece (although aesthetically less succeeded than the rest of the novel): the reader is told how the relatives of a Brahmin widow twice grab her and throw her back to the fire, beating her with logs from the pyre to

[172] *Op. cit.,* 1983: 56.
[173] *Ibid,* 1983: 93.

deprive her of her senses. Beyond direct enforcement to perform *sati*, as is clearly the depicted case, the text does not dismiss the power of superstition and social pressure in convincing some depressed widows to go ahead with it.

On another level, *sati* is connected to politics and the manipulation of popular opinion for electoral gains. The sudden appearance of saints and speakers, preaching in villages, dressed and painted with religious symbols, and encouraging a return to fundamentalism is a phenomenon that implies a degree of organisation and planning which cannot be accepted as coincidence. Sahgal hints such agitators have political aims, are instructed where to go, and told what to say.

As the narrative develops, the text offers one more instance of the possible typical developments leading to *sati*. Suddenly, Sonali's great-grandfather died, although he was in good health and only fifty, exactly as the local "saint" had predicted. Out of the blue, distant relatives arrive, and since the only son of the deceased is under age, an uncle claims the inheritance of the house and family assets. Both widowed mother and son realise they are about to be robbed and they make legal arrangements to protect the son's rights (none of them considered a widow's claims a practical solution). A few days later, when the son returns home from college, he finds the house strangely empty and though he rushes to the river bank, he is too late to save his mother from burning. He is told his mother accepted *sati* as a bargain with his father's family to keep the son's inheritance rights, but, knowing the kind of person his mother was, the poor teenager knows that this explanation is false. She was simply murdered to shut up their inheritance claims. The broken-hearted boy (Sonali's grandfather) was dispatched to England to study, and that was the end of the affair. Back to the present, Sonali recalls that this place became a spot of pilgrimage[174] where the last woman on the region committed *sati* (within the fiction of the narrative plot this last *sati* happened to be Sonali's own great-grandmother). Within the frame of the whole narrative, this historical memory repeats the social logic of Rose's murder, projecting into Indian cultural references, a habit of regarding women as more "die-able", like in the "accidents" that "happened" to Rose and Mona. In spite of Sahgal's reference to *sati* as an element of the historical past of India, apparently, this is not such a settled issue.

According to Radha Kumar, there has been a recent case (September 1987) of *sati* in the district of Shekhavati[175], which was amply discussed by local press. This district used to belong to powerful landowners who lost their status under the land reforms of the 1950s. Once deprived of wealth and power, these deposed landlords turned to *sati* and other traditions as the means to restore their sense of pride and dignity consolidating, again, the identity of the Rajput community. The spot where the last widow was burnt (the eighteen year old Roop Kanwar) became a place of pilgrimage, with parking lots, stalls selling food and souvenir shops. Right wing politics like to be seen visiting the place, and state authorities are complacent to avoid alienating the vote of the Rajput community. Kumar's paper was relevant for me to place *sati* as a current problem, and not a problem of the past[176]. Furthermore, this particular example of political dynamics in Shekhavati shows how inter-dependent communal identities, politics and the oppression of women are, which amounts to say that changing women's status in Indian society implies messing with

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[174] *Ibid,* 1987: 252.

[175] Radha Kumar; "Identity Politics and the Contemporary Indian Feminist Movement" *in* Identity Politics & Women Cultural Reassertions and Feminisms in International Perspective, Valentine M. Moghadam (ed.), Westview Press, Boulder, San Francisco, Oxford, 1994.

[176] Actually, according to the *Chicago Tribune*, there was another *sati*, on November 11, 1999, Charan Shah, a 55 year old Dalit woman (*Chicago Tribune*, November 18, 1999). Another case occurred August 2002, in a village of Madhya Pradesh, when 65 years old Kuttu Bai died at her husband's funeral pyre (India Express Bureau, 06 August 2002, Internet network news).

powerful interests. This particularly tight connection between women and politics is made via tradition and the self-assertion of the dominant castes and communities. The novel Rich Like Us is a good case study to draw these connections. Not only is the Emergency regime always represented as a "family business", a sort of "club" or "dynasty", but we are shown high caste Brahmin Kashmiriness as a serious power claim based on lineage and caste aristocracies.

As Nira Yuval Davis[177] points out, tradition is instrumental to keep the coherence and the identity of an ethnic or national group. The survival of tradition (and of a strong distinctive identity) depends of its appeal to the individual as part of, and responsible for, the collective community: Your private "self" is imbued with meaning, making you responsible for the perpetuation and purity of the community. That is why it may make sense to live by a set of unnecessary rules that may be very demanding on the individual. The mechanics of the manipulation of tradition for the assertion of caste or community inside Indian society is a good example to understand local restrictions and demands on feminine identities. In the context of India's fragmented cultural diversity, politicians know that, for millions of illiterate peasants and impoverished urban dwellers, the appeal of religion and tradition is the effective way to captivate popular support. On this account, traditional codes and life styles are frequently used to create distinguishing borders between local cultures (and in relation to foreign influence, too), asserting communal identity, and the corresponding sectarian party, as the legitimate representative of the community. Hence, communal codes do not amount to receptive grounds to promote agendas of change, especially among high caste groups, whose lineage and status establishes the claim to power and privilege.

In conclusion, after mapping the power mechanisms among patriarchal, high caste aristocracies in India, Sahgal's novel presents a set of directions for institutional reform, targeting increased vigilance over possibilities of domestic violence, enforcing punishment for these, protecting women's/widow's inheritance rights and demanding a public rejection of violent elements in India's traditions. As a positive aspect of the represented social world, Sahgal writes a plot around bonds of friendship between women (Sonali and Rose), being this friendship the first site of support, advice and encouragement. The relevance of Sahgal's Rich Like Us to discuss current women's issues and agendas in India is more effectively argued if one compares the content of this novel, with other novels, equally written by Indian women. That is precisely what I would like to do next, proceeding to a discussion of Arundhati Roy's polemic debut novel. I will start again from a postcolonial approach and then, move on to a feminist reading.

[177] Nira Yuval Davis, "Identity Politics and Women's Identity", *in op. cit.* Moghadam, 1994.