

## National Emergency in Nayantara Sahgal's *Rich Like Us*

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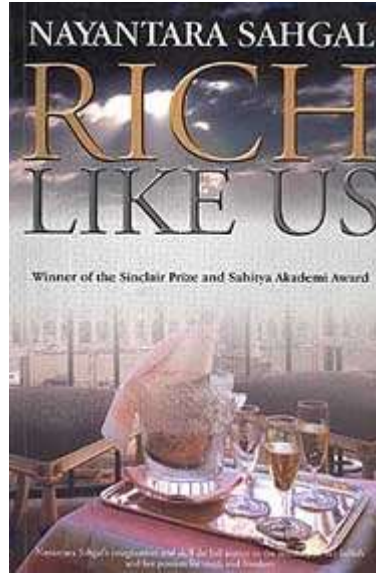
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### Proclamation of Internal Emergency

In 1975, India experienced its greatest political crisis since independence when the state of Internal Emergency was declared on 26 June. By the beginning of 1973, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's popularity had begun to decline. People's expectations remained unfulfilled. Little dent was being made on rural or urban poverty or economic inequality. The year 1973 also witnessed oil shock when world prices of crude oil increased four-fold, leading to massive increase in the prices of petroleum products and fertilizers. The price rise affected both the poor and the middle classes.

Economic recession, unemployment, price rise and scarcity of goods led to large scale industrial unrest and a wave of strikes in different parts of the country during 1972 and 1973.

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There occurred a railway strike all over India in May 1974, and it lasted for twenty two days and law and order deteriorated in 1974-75.

Indira Gandhi proclaimed a State of Emergency on the morning of 26, June 1975. In the early hours of 26 June, a large number of people were arrested under the Maintenance of Internal Security Act. Arrests continued throughout the period and the people were released after a few days or months. In all, more than 10,000 were arrested; among those arrested were also a large number of anti-social elements such as smugglers, hoarders, black marketers and known gonads.

The Emergency centered unlimited state and party power in the hands of the Prime Minister to be exercised through politicians and bureaucrats around her. There were several reasons for the people to get disillusioned with the Emergency, such as price raise, corruption, black-marketers and smugglers. Government servants and teachers were being forced to fulfill their sterilization quotas.

In April 1975, Sanjay Gandhi had emerged as a parallel authority, interfering at will in the working of the government and the administration. In July 1976, he forwarded his four-point programme. The four points were: Don't take dowry at the time of marriage, practice family planning, limit families to only two children and plant trees and promote literacy.

### **State of Emergency Became the Focus of Literary Creativity**

In the literary world, quite naturally, the Emergency became the main theme of the political novelists. They were impelled by a suppressed fury to call to account the perpetrators of the evils during the period of Emergency.

## ***Rich Like Us***

The Emergency declared in the year 1975 by Indira Gandhi was a traumatic period for the country. Some Indians were able to welcome it, whereas some resented it. Nayantara Saghal's *Rich Like Us* presents a vivid picture of the excesses of the Emergency. She presents the move towards dynastic succession by-passing democracy, the Indian socio-political milieu, its disparities, rampant corruption and political upheaval during the period of Emergency of 1975. It is significant that, in the political column she used to write for the *Indian Express*, Saghal had repeatedly cautioned against this eventuality. The imposition of the Emergency and the subsequent curbing of rights fulfilled her dire prophecies.

### **Following Saghal Tradition**



Courtesy: <http://nayantarasaghal.bookchums.com/>

*Rich like Us* belongs basically to the Saghal tradition and the novel focuses on the human dimension of the story predominated by political interest. The novel offers a fairly vivid picture of India under Emergency.

The declaration of Emergency meant curtailing of freedom in many ways: censorship, erratic arrests, prevention of public meetings, picking up at random victims for forced vasectomy, suppressing the opposition of all sorts, and monopolization of power. Using the past as a point of reference, particularly the Gandhian age when love of freedom truly flourished, she contrasts it with the troubled seventies in India and demonstrates convincingly that the Emergency is deep danger. The novelist shows that the clamping of Emergency is not a sudden development that took place overnight. It is the culmination of an erosion of moral values that set in among the politicians, civil servants and people at large after Independence. In the face of the corruption of the body politic and the individual human soul, what is the fate of those who resist it while the majority reconcile to it? This, precisely, is what Saghal explores in *Rich like Us* (Saghal, *Rich Like Us*-23).

### **Sonali and Rose**

*Rich like Us* is the story of the Emergency from the view point of two characters Sonali and Rose. Sonali is the main character as well as a miserable character in the novel, who suffers a lot in the wake of the Emergency. She represents the good and modern Indian womanhood. She is intellectual and intelligent, independent yet committed to communal good, uncompromisingly conscientious and idealistic. In the wake of the Emergency when she refuses to interpret rules to the advantage of political bosses, she is transferred without warning, demoted and punished.

Sonali, one of the main characters in the novel, thinks of an appropriate parallel right at the beginning of the novel - the story of “The Emperor’s clothes”. This reference occurs at different places:

We were all taking part in a thinly disguised masquerade, preparing the stage for family rule. And we were involved in a conspiracy of silence, which is why we were careful not to do more than say hello when we passed each other in the building, and not to talk about our work after hours, which made after-hours sessions very silent indeed. No one wanted trouble. So long as it didn’t touch us, we played along, pretending the Empress’s new clothes were beautiful. To put it charitably, we have being realistic. We knew we were up against a power we couldn’t handle, individually or collectively. (Saghal, *Rich Like Us*-29).

### **Travels Back to 150 Years**

The novel opens in the post-Emergency period, but travels back to more than a hundred and fifty years, analyzing and questioning the political relationship and the value systems of the past.

The novel begins in Dev’s house, where he and his wife are talking to a foreign guest, Newman, a collaborator in the proposed Happyola factory. Dev is the epitome of evil in the novel .He represents violence, greed, selfishness, cruelty, in a word; Indian politics gone badly. In the Happyola factory what brings them together is their concern for money. Newman has come to India in search of a market, and Dev is the Indian collaborator.

Ravi Kachru is an IAS officer educated at Oxford. He exemplifies compromise, the pliant bureaucrat. He actually turns himself into a puppet in order to play a key role in the success of the Emergency. He allows himself to put stuff into the hands of politicians. Contrasted with Dev's absorption in the Present is Sonali's preoccupation with the past. Sonali is an IAS officer, who has grown up in a world which had fostered idealism. She manages to turn her eyes away from the hard facts of life in Emergency-controlled India, but not for long. When she refuses to grant permission to Dev to open the Happyola factory, she is replaced by Kachru.

He (Kachru) was to replace me immediately as Joint Secretary in the ministry of Industry. He waited for me to say something, and when I didn't utter a word, he spread his hands in an apologetic gesture, turned round and walked out. If he had sneaked in and shot me I could not have been more dazed. Yet I remember thinking with a shaft of painful clarity what kind of automatons we of the civil service have become, and are not expected to reply. They are expected to obey. Ten minutes later a phone call informed me I was to go back to a posting to my state which I already knew, and the Union Government certainly knew, there was no vacancy at my level. I hadn't merely been transferred without warning. I had been demoted, punished and humiliated, and I had no inkling why (Saghal, *Rich Like Us*-31-32)

The Emergency had given all kinds of new twists and turns to politics and the world's largest democracy was looking nothing so much as one of the dictatorships India had loftily looked down upon.

### **Some Favouring Emergency**

Newman likes Emergency because strikes would be banned, but does not otherwise care for politics. He has a point of view that politicians and young men like Dev are easily trapped in foreign collaboration for money.

“This Emergency is just what we needed. The trouble makers are in jail. An opposition is something we never needed. The way the country’s being run now, with one person giving orders, and no one being allowed to make a fuss about it in the cabinet or in parliament, means things can go full steam ahead without delays and weighing pros and cons forever. Strikes are banned. It is going to be very good for business”. (Sahgal, *Rich like Us*, 10)

### **Alienation**

Sonali feels bitter and frustrated thinking that society rates those in power higher than honest and sincere officers. She feels completely alienated and her sense of rejection reacts with determination not to “grovel and beg favors and act like a worm instead of a person” (Sahgal, *Rich like Us*, 37)

Sonali’s father was an ICS officer who joined the service reluctantly. When the Emergency was imposed, he had no duty to perform, he was a retired civil servant. Sonali understands why her father could not bear to live through times when history would be revised and rewritten. Influenced by her strong and uncompromising father, Sonali grew up believing that the democracy of Gandhiji and Pandit Nehru should never be allowed to die in your mind. They shared their faith in the democratic system.

Sonali's Grandfather had, opposed *Sati* while her father remained determined through the crisis of the Freedom Movement. Sonali's Grandfather explained why his mother had been forced by his uncle to commit *Sati* and his anger and pain had increased by reading his Grandfather's diary:

Sonali says she did not see just the evil in it, but the anger and the strength of the nineteen year old boy who struggled to save his mother and who would have probably killed his mother's murderers. Many other stray instances of seemingly weak men putting up a fight come to Sonali's mind. (Varalakshmi 45)

### **Goodness of Rose and Her Honest Living**

Rose is the next important character in this novel. Her background is in honest living and goodness. It was her working class morals that gave her the strength not only to uproot herself initially from London, but also to make a life for herself with dignity in Lahore and later in Delhi through all those trying years when Ram got fascinated with Marcella and later with another lady who took his fancy. Ram's first wife Mona, like Rose, is shaped with her background which is a typical conservative traditional Punjabi home. Later in the novel, they lived together in the same house as sisters. In the meanwhile Rose acquires the friendship of Sonali. Sonali feels more human after getting to know Rose. She tells Sonali about Dev's forgery - that he is withdrawing his father's money with forged cheques from the nationalized bank. They are ready to forgive him because he had a difficult childhood.

Sonali refuses to accept the judgments of the rest of the family about Dev, that he was a poor, lost, lonely boy. Her voice invokes a terrible familial crime, the lapse of one of its members into violence and dishonesty for purposes of attaining wealth and power.

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Later in the novel, her friend Rose loses her life for which her step-son was the reason. This tragedy reveals the bitter truth that women are mercilessly murdered by their own relatives. This was also the case with Sonali's great grandmother in 1905:

My murdered great-grandmother's relatives had said she had sacrificed herself-which even a goat has too much sense to do on the altar of 'sati'. They had built a shrine on the guilt-soaked spot to commemorate the martyrdom of the last woman to perform the noble act in the entire region - a place of pilgrimage no less, with nothing but a document at the bottom of my father's trunk to prove it had been murder. I was in a rage as I got down to sorting Rose's possessions, dark tides of blood around me ending in movements and shrines (Sahgal, *Rich like Us*, 222)

### **Lonesome Sonali**

Rose's untimely death leaves Sonali bereft and lonely. Sonali and Rose shared certain ideas and basic approaches to love and its problems. Rose lends meaning to other people's lives even after her death. A beggar, for, instance, whom she used to feed, finds meaning purpose in life because of her. A minor character in the novel, but a powerful voice, the beggar without hands raises the stumps of his arms in a shaky salute to Rose:

The handless salute left her (Sonali) thinking about his handstand, the struggle about his humanness. Whenever she saw him afterwards from her bedroom window, looking no bigger than a beetle at that distance as he moved about near tombs, she could picture him healed and whole, walking upright, running and leaping, and each nightfall becoming exultantly whole once again by the light of the stars. (Sahgal, *Rich like Us*, 81)

He tells about the lives of the lower class people who worked as laborers and their women, who are raped and killed by brick kiln masters and their men. Others were molested and raped by the police called in by land owners' intent on preventing share croppers from getting their full share of their crops. The beggar's words, repeated first to Rose, are revealed by the third person narrator, who retrieves them from Englishwoman's head during a discussion of movie censorship. Such terrifying stories of oppression and violence are meant to counter the language of the Emergency coming from the Prime Minister. He tells Sonali that his arms and legs were broken by the landlord whom he was trying to oppose. This shows the suppression of the Indian masses by the brute force of the ruling classes.

### **Betrayal of Values**

Sonali reserves serious criticism for those who should have known better, those who, for reasons of family connections or a lust for power, betrayed the values upon which the modern nation-state of India was constructed. While at the dinner party, Sonali describes the nation-state with explicit sarcasm:

“And then the capital's professional elite gave a demonstration of what the third world's crust talks about when its country's democratic institutions have just been engulfed by a tidal wave. The Establishment professor described the clinic in the Soviet Union where he had eight months' free treatment for arthritis. The editor outlined tomorrow's editorial, in which he would say Madam had a good faith thought it her constitutional duty to override the constitution, and while he would regret the suspension of liberty and the right to life, he would reluctantly conclude that there had been no alternative. And lawyer summed it all up when he gave his professional opinion that the constitution would have

to be drastically amended, if not rewritten, to give Madame powers to fight disruptive forces and crush the vested interests she had been battling against since infancy. Delhi had always been an imperial city, hadn't it? So what was so new about special powers and hereditary rule? (Saghal, *Rich Like Us* 85)

### **Mona – Emblem of Indian Womanhood**

Mona is a traditional woman- a giver, a loser and a victim. She is loyal, devoted and stubborn. Mona represents Indian womanhood. Her devotion to Ram is monastic. When Rose saves her life, she forgets the past and becomes her friend.

### **A Strong Dialogical Structure**

Saghal creates a strongly dialogical structure which represents the split psyche of the Indian people. There were some who supported Indira Gandhi and others who were outraged by the Emergency, those who did not fully understand what was happening and many who were afraid to act. Saghal openly condemned the Emergency. In *Rich Like Us* she uses historical facts to enrich the form and content of her narrative. She is not only a novelist but also a journalist but her narrative does not degenerate into journalistic reportage. The novel is wonderfully set apart with a fine, clear, disenchanted eye and an acerbic moral intelligence that is devastating without ever raising its voice.

The novel makes some use of some editorials and letters written to the editors of newspapers as a form of historical evidence. One of them is editorial of the *Calcutta Gazette* of 7 December 1829, which expresses supreme pleasure and celebrates the Act of Abolition of the cruel rite of sati passed by Lord William Bentick. The English administrator is applauded for his

reform, which has ended “a system demoralizing in its effect on the living, a revolting system of suicide and murder” (Saghal, *Rich Like Us* 134)

### **Narrative Consciousness**

In *Rich Like Us*, there are two main characters who projected narrative consciousness, Sonali and Rose. Sonali and Rose relate well to each other despite the differences of age, upbringing and nationalities.

the Emergency provides only a take –off point for a questioning at many levels. The narrative posits questions related to the nature of the empire, its professed idealism and its real aims of self-preservation; it questions the hollowness of Victorian liberalism, the myth of the golden past, the corruption and fallibility within human society, the earlier authoritarian pattern and their collapse, the validity of resistance. There are several more questions asked. Oblique the issue of economic imperialism is also considered. (Saghal, *Rich Like Us* 60)

### **Challenging Known Solutions**

*Rich Like Us* offers no easy solutions to mankind’s problems; on the contrary, it challenges all known solutions.

It projects a picture of the repetitive nature o revolutions. It does however speak for the human consciousness-as distinct from character and for human courage as different from bravery. Just as there are no solutions, so also there is no one you can blame. The fixture of the past is woven with many threads. In the story of “The Emperor and His New Clothes” one does not

really know whether the Emperor, the weavers or the people are to blame. Reality eludes them all (Saghal, *Rich Like Us* 62)

The entire action of the novel deals with the changes in the Emergency brought about in the social and political fabric of the country by analyzing the response it evolved among the individuals, classes and groups. The novelist has used the parable of the Emperor's new clothes; this is a serious criticism of the civil servants who just closed their eyes to the corruption of the Government for safeguarding their private interests.

Saghal presents the theme of the Emergency from various angles. The official version of the Emergency, touted by politicians and businessmen who used official patronage for carrying out secret business operations to make profit without doing anything which could be called productive, is countered mostly by Sonali.

The novel records how Prime Minister got unstinted support from civil servants, confirming Saghal's earlier finding that they represented the thinking and mentality of the precolonial times, that ordinary people needed to be controlled and directed with a strong hand. Some officers like Ravi Kachru undertook to motivate the people to organize small professional groups on the lines of the medieval guilds, such as lawyers, teachers, entrepreneurs to "strengthen the hands of the Prime Minister, "one of the dismal features of the times the novel stresses.

### **Resistance to Tyrannical Policies**

The novel incorporates the actual resistance to the tyrannical policies of Indira Gandhi. Even though Saghal was Indira Gandhi's cousin, she attacked the Indira Gandhi Government,

which practiced authoritarian policies and displayed dictatorial tendencies towards the body politic even before the actual declaration of the Emergency. The most noticeable feature of Saghal's strategy in the novel is to establish that the Emergency was not just a political event, for it did not stop at activating official agencies into perpetrating repression on innocent people.

### **A Political Novelist**

Saghal, as a political novelist, suggests that, in situations of oppression and tyranny, history can provide a means of hope, not just for surviving, but for getting the strength to fight the worst of tyrants and ultimately make them yield to the popular will. The dark period of India came to an end and light shone over India thanks to intellectuals like Saghal.

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