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## **Fractured Allegiances: The Individual and Democratic Ideals in Nayantara Sahgal's *Rich Like Us***

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### **Abstract:**

Nayantara Sahgal's *Rich Like Us* provides a poignant interrogation of the relationship between individuals and democratic ideals during one of India's most turbulent political periods the Emergency (1975–77). Through its dual protagonists, Rose and Sonali, the novel explores how personal agency is compromised under authoritarian rule, and how the erosion of democratic institutions affects not only political structures but also the ethical and psychological fabric of individual lives. This paper examines how *Rich Like Us* critiques the betrayal of democratic values in postcolonial India, arguing that the characters' personal struggles mirror the nation's institutional decay. The novel ultimately becomes a space where democratic ideals freedom, justice, equality are contested through the lived experiences of its central figures. This analysis further reveals how Sahgal uses narrative form and shifting perspectives to underscore the fragmentation of truth in a politically manipulated society. By intertwining the personal with the political, the novel demonstrates how systemic oppression silences dissent and distorts moral clarity. *Rich Like Us* thus serves not only as a critique of a specific historical moment but also as a broader meditation on the fragility of democracy when confronted with authoritarianism.

**Keywords:** Freedom, Struggles, Individuals and Democratic ideals.

In *Rich Like Us*, Sahgal uses fiction as a tool of political criticism, interrogating the tension between individual autonomy and the degeneration of democratic governance. Set during the Emergency period, when civil liberties were suspended and press freedoms curtailed. The novel reflects on how India's postcolonial democracy strayed from its constitutional promises. Sahgal's political lineage and liberal outlook infuses the narrative with a nuanced yet uncompromising critique of political authoritarianism and the betrayal of Nehruvian ideals. This paper investigates how individual characters both resist and succumb to the pressures of an undemocratic state, foregrounding the vulnerability of democratic ideals when confronted by power, patriarchy, and political ambition.

Through the contrasting experiences of Sonali, a civil servant disillusioned by state corruption, and Rose, a British expatriate entangled in the complexities of Indian society, Sahgal illustrates how personal and political betrayals intertwine. The novel emphasizes how bureaucratic complicity and moral apathy enable authoritarian excesses, often at the cost of individual conscience. Sahgal's incisive portrayal of Emergency-era politics critiques not only the state machinery but also the societal structures that normalize repression. Her characters' inner conflicts become metaphors for a larger democratic crisis, where silence often replaces dissent. In doing so, *Rich Like Us* becomes both a historical document and a moral inquiry into the cost of political complicity.

The Emergency period (1975–77), declared by then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, forms the novel's historical and ideological core. This period saw the suspension of civil liberties, mass arrests of dissenters, and the silencing of democratic discourse. Sahgal's novel dramatizes this constitutional crisis not through overt political events but through its impact on individuals embedded in the system: civil servants, businessmen, housewives, and political actors.

Sonali, an Indian civil servant educated in Oxford, represents the ideal of a rational, secular bureaucrat committed to constitutional values. Yet, her increasing marginalization reflects the corruption of the very institutions she serves. Sonali's displacement by less competent but politically loyal colleagues exemplifies how merit and integrity are devalued under autocracy. Her alienation is symbolic of the fate of democratic idealism in an era of political opportunism.

While Sonali's narrative exposes the systemic failures of democracy from within the bureaucracy, Rose's trajectory provides a more personal, emotional account of democratic breakdown. As a British woman married to an Indian businessman, Rose is an outsider in postcolonial Indian society. Her attempts to belong to love, to participate, to understand are continuously thwarted by patriarchal and cultural constraints. Rose's vulnerability is intensified during the Emergency, where her lack of legal and social recognition leaves her powerless against institutional and familial exploitation. Her marginalization reflects how democracy fails those who exist on its fringes: foreigners, women, and the socially unprotected. While Sonali confronts the state from within its corridors, Rose experiences its failures at the most intimate level within her home and marriage.

Both women, though vastly different in background, are united by their powerlessness in the face of a collapsing democratic order. Sahgal uses their intersecting narratives to show how the personal becomes political, and how authoritarianism penetrates every layer of individual life.

Rose becomes an unwitting victim of political and familial machinations. Her legal status is tenuous; her voice is disregarded. Her tragic death at the hands of Dev, her stepson, and his collusion with corrupt state officials, represents the ultimate silencing of the individual in a climate of unchecked power. Through Rose, Sahgal shows how even a political individuals can become casualties of political repression. Both Rose and Sonali embody forms of resistance, though subtle and often ineffectual. Sonali's refusal to endorse illegal actions, and her quiet withdrawal from a morally compromised system, demonstrate a principled if isolated form of dissent.

Unlike overt revolutionary figures, Sahgal's protagonists are not activists; they are everyday individuals forced to confront the collapse of values they once believed were foundational to the nation. Resistance in *Rich Like Us* is marked by personal integrity rather than collective action. This, in itself, becomes a commentary on the failures of the democratic experiment in India that those who still hold democratic values are increasingly alone, without institutional or social support. The novel also explores how language and its suppression operates as a tool of power. During the Emergency, censorship and propaganda distorted public discourse.

In *Rich Like Us*, the contrast between silence and speech shows how power works unfairly in society. Rose stays silent because she is ignored in both legal and social spaces, while people like Dev freely twist the truth for personal and political gain. Sonali tries to speak out through her reflections on justice and history, but real change remains out of reach. Rose's silence highlights how gender and identity can make someone invisible, while Sonali's position in government shows how even those within the system struggle to make a difference. In the end, the novel shows that silence can be both a way to survive and a sign of how democracy is being silenced. Sahgal uses these moments of silence to show how fear and repression shape people's choices in an undemocratic state. The characters' struggles reflect a larger loss of voice and agency in society during the Emergency. Through their experiences, the novel warns how easily democratic values can be lost when power goes unchecked.

*Rich Like Us* presents a sobering meditation on the fragility of democracy when power is centralized and dissent is criminalized. Through its portrayal of individuals like Rose and Sonali, Sahgal illustrates how democratic ideals liberty, justice, equality are not only legal constructs but lived experiences that can be violated in both public and private spheres. The novel suggests that the preservation of democracy requires more than electoral mechanisms; it demands an ethical commitment by individuals and institutions alike. In documenting the struggles of her characters, Sahgal does not offer easy solutions but insists on the moral urgency of resistance, even when it is muted or ultimately tragic. In this sense, *Rich Like Us* transcends its immediate political context to serve as a timeless reminder of democracy's inherent vulnerability in the face of authoritarian temptation. Sahgal's nuanced portrayal of resistance whether quiet, reluctant, or incomplete underscores that the fight for democratic values is often waged in the everyday choices of ordinary individuals.

The novel challenges readers to reflect on their own roles within systems of power, urging vigilance, moral clarity, and the courage to dissent. By intertwining the political with the personal, Sahgal reaffirms that the health of a democracy is measured not only by its institutions but by the resilience and conscience of its citizens. Ultimately, the novel stands as both a critique and a call to action, warning that the erosion of freedom often begins in silence.

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