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Impact of Politics on Caste and Gender in Nayantara Sahgal's *Rich like Us***Dr. Nidhi Sharma**Asst. Prof. Dept of English,
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Jaipur. (Rajasthan)Claudia Nubile (2003) emphatically states in *The Danger of Gender*:

I don't want to be reborn a woman.
It's too painful. I didn't get my mother's love; my
father's love. I didn't get also. I don't know what a
brother-sister love is like. How a father loves a
daughter, how a mother loves her daughter. I don't
know. (56)

Feminist literature in India is not a fledgling in Indian literary scenario. It has been there ever since various perspectives on life were recorded in the spool of literature though it came late on the literary front unveiling its confinement behind the curtains. Feminism, in its broadest implication has three distinct sub-versions, each with its individual adherent. Feminism in Indian context is the by-product of Western liberal conceptions in general and the feminist interpretations thoughts in particular. The essential contributing factors have been the legacy of equality between the sexes, inherited from freedom struggle, constitutional rights of women, spread of education and the resultant novel awareness among women in society. The Indian women dubiously caught in the maze of Indian transition and modernity saddled with the burden of the past to cast off her expectations from the base to the crux of feminism in Indian literature. Women's writing cannot be considered as a colossal structure and all women's writing cannot be categorized as feminist. But when women write, they essentially turn back to their mothers and thus their writing encapsulates individual qualities and characteristics. George Eliot, in her essay titled "*Woman in France: Madame de Sable*" remarks:

We think it an immense mistake to maintain there is no sex in literature. Science has no sex: the mere knowing and reasoning faculties, if the act correctly, must go through the same process....But in art and literature...in which every particular modification of the individual makes itself, woman has something specific to contribute. (8)

Emancipatory feminist theory came into existence in the 1960s, with the birth of women's studies, where began the questioning of gender-assigned subject positions by exploring varied aspects of gendered identities. Contrarily, men's studies or masculinity studies in particular emerged as a body of theory which began to propagate masculine identity and sexuality. Even though men's studies gained maturity as an area of study way back in 1980s, it didn't gain momentum as substantially as women's studies. Like women's studies also encompassed a wide forum of ideological arenas as a biological, cultural, social or psychic contact. It can be essentially noted that feminism has been configured as an ideological category that motivates gender parity and emancipation. Feminist perceptions may be the province of both the genders; historically the participation of women was stronger as compared to men in its discourses. Sophia Phoca (2001) delineates the issue in *The Routledge Companion to Feminism and Post-Feminism* as:

The issue of how men should participate in feminist discourses has been a contentious one. The key concern is that men will appropriate feminist discourse and paradoxically inscribe it with the same phallogocentric strategies feminism has sought to challenge. So although the question 'What is masculinity?' is an important one, it was initially seen as an area which should be developed in men's studies. (47)

Rather than conceptualizing the term 'gender' as a fundamental determination of the social existence we should actually perceive it to be the cultural construct denying its biological significance, eventually opening the ways for the radical, complex and unfinished work of revealing the hidden facts of ideologies operating within the literary texts and constitution of culture. The purpose of this paper focusing on Caste and Gender is not to replace the dominating male subject at the center of traditional polity with a powerful female subject who would re-write politics and repossess the authority. On the contrary, this chapter on gender seeks to re-examine questions of authority and self-making to expose the tensions of a hidden dialectic that runs through the veins of politics and to restore the conflict ambiguity and tragedy of the political process. Gender commonly refers to the method adopted by an individual in professing his sexual character in a cultural canvas. It can be termed as a two-way process where the individual reaches out to the cultural regulations and the society relying on the individual with its unending expectations. The important analysis in this direction leads us to notify that 'Gender' as a terminological entity resides only in the humans as other species have 'Sexes' but only humans have genders. As Joan Roughgarden (2009) while discussing on the evolution of gender in *Evolution's Rainbow* comments on their biological differences:

Gender is the appearance, behavior and life history of a sexed body. A body becomes "sexed" when classified with respect to the size of gametes produced. Thus, gender is appearance plus action how an organism uses morphology including color and shape, plus behavior to carry out a sexual role. (27)

The issues of Caste and Gender are the common conceptions of postmodern era on which the text can be deciphered, and are basically realistic and practical in their respective approaches. The ability of expressing knowledge and subject matter doesn't only confine itself to the meaning of individual expression, but the society culture, profession and institution are reflected in these attempts. Hence while concentrating on the 'reason', 'truth' and 'reality' of a particular text; we have to be particular about the contingent forces working in the background, responsible for the creation of an art. The twentieth century is necessarily considered to be an age of unrest, doubts, disasters and a cradle of multiple complex 'isms'. It gave birth to a series of sociological, psychological and intellectual uplift. The pragmatic approach to the varied ideologies lead to the scrutiny of the time-tested beliefs of our Epics, *Vedas* and *Puranas* that project marriage not only as a social instrument, but a moral weapon to maintain the stability of the psychological stature of an individual. But unfortunately the post-modern conceptions degrade the auspicious ceremony of the marriage to doubt, cynicism and erosion. Like their western counterparts, the Indian women novelists also employ the minute nuances of marriage in their creative writings. The twentieth century woman finds herself in a state of moral dilemma. The inclination towards education had made her more aware and vigilant about her rights as an individual. Education has widened her psychological terrains by making her prone to even the slightest psychological ruptures that life offers, eventually pushing her into a more fragile zone as compared to her predecessors.

Nayantara Sahgal's *Rich Like Us* (2001) deftly portrays the societal dominance of male over female. With the research on this novel, attempt has been made to study that not only love but even marriage vows can not bind a man to a woman. Marriage for a man only means a process where he can entertain comforts of his life physically and socially. It doesn't guarantee faith at any level. But for a woman it is a matter of sheer devotion. The discussion will deal with the 'unconscious' ideological elements in Nayantara Sahgal's *Rich Like Us* especially the phases in which the leading female protagonist Sonali, despite encompassing an elite persona of a post-colonial environment fails to adjust in the patriarchal set-up. It can rightly be examined that in Sahgal's text, the unconscious excels the unrealized space and the plot emerges to be a political hold over which the author seems to have no control. Various contradicting scenes become more obvious in regard to the portrayal of characters and events in Sahgal's narrative. One may understand Sonali as a modern woman because she is highly educated, creative, insightful and articulate. She belongs to a socially and economically dominant class of Indian society. Although she doesn't seem to have a hold over the environment and her discourse, yet she successfully manages to cope both with the colonial heritage and the problems of extending this heritage in the large canvas of the postcolonial context. However the unfortunate side on her part is her inability in assimilating to the environment. In spite of belonging to the elite society, Sonali is only partially able to overcome the patriarchal neocolonial condition that defines her. Analyzing the novel we find that all the main characters are in same way marginalized. Jasbir Jain suggests that Sahgal frequently connects politics with women's social position, because in all her novels, "Political condition ... determines the kind of opportunities available to the individuals" (143).

The isolation of Sonali takes place politically and socially, though economically she is stable. The irony lies in the situation when although being the 'center' of political administration, she always remains an 'outsider' in the corridors of power. She moves in a man's world but is not destined to secure a place, a comfortable haven in either the man's or woman's world. The only respite for her is her assimilation in the society by bonding with friends and getting in touch with those who need her.

We also have another character called Rose who is equally thwarted, marginalized socially and politically lead to destruction. She falls in a pathetic situation, where, being a displaced English woman, she tries to adapt herself as a Hindu wife but fails in her attempt. Both Sonali and Rose make efforts to enter in the social circle but both these strong individualistic ladies lose before the political system that forces them to confine themselves only on the periphery of the social circle.

Sonali is portrayed as an elite, senior civil servant, who is taken aback by the devastation of the basic democratic ideals during the Emergency Rule. Her resignation from society is delineated in terms of both her personal crisis where she loses her job, coming to terms with political realities and learning to stand up for what is right and a contradictory element to the sacrifices of the historical freedom fighters. The entire political drama is seen through her eyes. And when idealism and bravery finds a place in her, she becomes politically ignorant. Sophia Phoca (2001) relates to Spivak's notions on the context of Feminism in *The Routledge Companion to Feminism* when she says:

Can men theorize feminism? Can whites theorize racism, can the bourgeoisie theorize revolution and so on. It is only when the former groups theorize that the situation is politically intolerable.

Therefore it is crucial that the members of these groups are kept vigilant about their assigned subject positions. (46)

Sonali, in Sahgal's *Rich like Us* remains unmarried. She shared a warm relationship with Ravi Kachru who had been her childhood friend and classmate. She perceived the change in him, as he became corrupt in his office as opposed to Sonali's ideologies and principles. This gives birth to resentment within Sonali, as; she cannot compromise on her values. Having intended to marry him, she remains unmarried. She concentrates only on her career as her aspirations had been shattered by Ravi. Sonali had been asked to choose a particular career by her father and she decided to take the ICS. She idealizes her father:

Sonali's pride towered when her father motivates her to become an I.C.S. officer. This expectation also burdens an 'educated' woman to work harder than her capacity. As a daughter, she strives hard to fulfill her father's dream to see her as an I.C.S. officer. Her father wanted her to be like him. After breaking the hurdles of the exams, Sonali finally succeeded with flying colors. As an I.C.S. she professes sheer dedication and commitment in her career. It is only when she is thrown out of her privileged designation she realizes the extent of political corruption prevalent in the so called elite administrative service. She also comprehends the implications of her own resilience. She now understands the ugly reality of her existence as an IAS officer and faces up the consequences.

On the other side, analyzing Rose's situation, we find that her alienation from the vicious social circle is of a slightly different order. As a foreigner, involved with an Indian, she is supposedly shown as a rude and outspoken character that becomes an intruder and later on accomplishes in earning a partial acceptance from the Indian society. We see her accommodate with the neocolonial society more efficiently than Sonali. Rose belongs to a simple family background with primary education, but she proves her mettle in adapting to both the social and political challenges of her inheritance. She is very particular about people looking up to her with respect. She has an individualistic perception of which she is found quite often conscious about and she expects others also to recognize it and respect it. She becomes the victim of the hostility expressed on her by Ram's first wife Mona and her father-in-law.

At the ending phase of *Rich Like Us*, Dev, Ram's son hatches a conspiracy of murdering her fearing that she would destroy all his plans. When Sonali learns about her death, she compares it with *Sati*, all those women who are burnt alive, they are all devoid of power, and they are all dispossessed and marginalized characters who don't have the hold over the life of their own lives. Women are the oppressed creatures of society who tend to play the expected roles of wife, mother, daughter-in-law and sister-in-law without even knowing at what juncture life would be mercilessly snatched from their hands.

But in Sonali's case the above quote doesn't prove apt as she is reduced to a mere pawn in the hands of politics. *Rich like Us* attempts in taking up the issue of human character and colonization in the context of '*Sati*'. There can be an allegorical relation between the ruthless employment of the Emergency and the social set-up. We see how Sonali finds a solace in her father's memory, who has recently died, to assuage the sheer humiliating experience of getting chucked off from her elite post. In her father's remembrance, as she turns the pages written by him and some newspaper cuttings of 1829 dealing with the *Sati* law. These articles reveal her family history and give her an insight into the history of the people in those times. It depicts how her great grandmother was forced to perform '*Sati*'. On the other hand, she also comes across few pages that deal with the resistance of '*Sati*' practice by certain

sections of society. It showed how Sonali's great grandfather turned out to be a man of liberal views, a social reformer, who constantly strived to abolish 'Sati' system. But an irony takes place when his widow is forced to perform 'Sati' as an act of bargain for her son's future. Sahgal brilliantly juxtaposes the conventional and neocolonial forms of atrocities by exposing the later sin when Dev, the step son of Rose, pushes her into a twentieth century version of 'Sati' by plotting to kill her. Thus we can see how civilization has either not developed or has only progressed in terms of brutality. And only the citizens of this civilization can shoulder the responsibility of their own degraded ideals than to blame the era that witnessed it.

On examining Sahgal's works, it can be analyzed that her characterization of female characters revolves around two types of women. The first group consists of women who are satisfied within the confines of Indian orthodoxy performing their roles as house-hold women and the second group concerns with women who portray a strong sense of individuality and an intense analytical mind shuttling between the traditional and modern patterns of life owing to their secondary status, the submissive identity as a woman. Sahgal's woman characters belong to a class where women are free and independent in their decision of stepping out of marriage, not experiencing any pressure from their parents. Coming after an interval of seven years, *Rich like Us* (1983) marks the third and the most mature phase of Sahgal's career as a creative writer. The women belonging to this era of dramatics are those who are strong-willed and emotionally independent women. They are the ones who refuse to surrender to men. They are the mistresses of stupendous spirit. Sonali, who grows up in a western educational system is the one who suffers a lot. She has loads of unfulfilled dreams. In her tenure as an administrative officer, she refuses to entertain the male counterparts. Her survival instinct is so strong that instead of giving in, she gives up. And the critics as well as the readers don't take her resignation as the acceptance of defeat rather it's her defiance against the tyrannical oppression of the political forces. In a unique manner, she asserts her individuality. As John Hawley (1996) comments on Nayantara Sahgal in *Writing the Nation*:

In the Writings of Nayantara Sahgal, identity of the post-colonial woman seems to be fluid, something that displaces itself in various places on a constantly evolving continuum. Moreover, it is both subject to and created by the ideological history that surrounds it by ideology I mean an organized system of beliefs that operates in an individual, a society or a text, through conscious or unconscious representation of figuration. (161)

Rich Like Us also exposes how sex and physical relationship is connected to politics, since one aspect of politics relates to the physical involvement between man and woman. Jain echoes in her feminist articles that the women characters framed by Sahgal are looked upon only as sex commodities by the male characters and they have no freedom outside the confines of marriage. The political sterility or non-involvement is depicted in terms of sexual sterility or deformity, especially in the case of women. And the consequences of political tyranny are often presented in terms of sexual and physical victimization.

For instance, the social isolation of Sonali coupled with her lack of physical and sexual relationship with people reflects her political isolation. Hence there appears to be an implication that political commitment is like a physical encounter and Sonali's lack of physical intimacy reflects her political sterility. One instance of the above mentioned point is her attitude towards her career. We see how her choice of career always falls as an alternative to marriage and children. Taking up the role as a narrator of the text, she again attempts in isolating herself from other women she knows. Looking back on the marriages that she had

seen in her childhood, she resolves never to marry as for her the brides seemed to be like prisoners in confinement, who don't have a stand and can't think for their own-selves. Their lives are only for others, sacrificing and struggling. A woman, whatsoever her individual status in the society always remains a marginalized human. Bapsi Sidhwa (1992) in an interview in the *Toronto South Asian Review* makes a comment on the exploitative impact of colonialism on the post-colonial gender as follows:

Colonialism humiliated the men and they in turn, humiliated the women so, whenever the condition of society is weak or humbled, women suffer the most. It has given men the only vent for their frustration. And that pattern continues with expectations of subservience from the women. (48-49)

Of all the women novelists, Sahgal is the one who has played the role of a catalyst in the evolution of the feminist movement, and has examined woman's foray in historical, social, cultural and political perspectives. It is conventionally observed that the status of women in any civilization marks its performance. Hence it can be asserted that the slogan of equality between the sexes can only be doctrine, it can't be implemented as a practice. In *Rich Like Us* Sahgal depicts how 'love' stands only for passion for Ram Swaroop. The question of bigamy is put forth by Sahgal in exposing the uncomfortable zones for co-wives Mona and Rose. Both fall in a pathetic situation where for their man, age is no bar to indulge in an affair and both these ladies are cheated on by Ram. For Ram, love changes frequently as the base of the relationship is only lust. We see how for both Rose and Mona, life is nothing more than an agony and insecurity while for Ram it is a profitable arrangement on all the stages. As M.K. Bhatnagar(2005) rightly claims in *Indian Women's Writing*:

Ram enjoys life fully with both wives, with Mona looking after the household affairs and the child and Rose providing sensual pleasures and a company in business, whereas both the women feel wronged, lonely and insecure. Sahgal strongly condemns the attitudes which reduce women to an object. (65)

Infidelity crosses its heights when despite getting married twice, Ram gets infatuated with Marcella, a young beautiful English woman. He gets so deeply indulged in the extra-marital affair that he gets separated from Rose. The separation however doesn't go on for long as it is only Rose who performs her duty professing her tender love in his paralytic state. As Neena Arora (1991) in *Nayantara Sahgal and Dorris Lessing* rightly observes in this context:

Man considers it as normal male behaviour to satisfy his desires at both the emotional and the physical level outside marriage while at the slightest hint of any deviation on her part which may not involve sex, man turns violent and hostile towards his wife and starts persecuting her (61)

It is clearly shown how women suffer from sexist bias in the patriarchal society that gives a sub-ordinate position to women and always offers her with a second-rated-treatment meted out. The pitiable reality of India where a woman is supposed to be worshipped as a '*Devi*' is that her existence only matters in the ways she serves the man. Privileging one sex all the time and marginalizing the other results in power division in marriage and serves the agony and suffering undergone by a woman. As Uma Narayan (1997) exposes her radical views on marriage in *Dislocating Cultures* when she says:

I would thus argue my sense that marriage as an oppressive institution for many women is something that predates my explicit acquisition of a feminist politics, and something I initially learned not from books but from Indian women in general, and my female relatives in particular. After all, many women like my

mother, whose 'cultural authenticity' and 'Indianness' are not at issue, commonly acknowledge the mistreatments women are subjected to within their marriage. (9)

Again the Indian society doesn't accept a single woman as a healthy, sane and normal person. She is suspected to be deficient or immoral. In search for self-realization she has to face hardships ranging from emotional to economic levels consisting of upbringing her family. Hence in such a condition she becomes a prey to exploitation and unfair circumstances. The important facet of Sahgal's women characters is that they don't reject their roles of wifehood and motherhood, but only question the traditional restrictions accompanying those roles. Thus Sahgal makes it very clear that her women don't claim for liberation but they only desire a respectful place for them in patriarchy where they have equal share in justice just like men. Sahgal focuses on how women yearn for dignity leaving aside their image of a mere sexual commodity. As Alison Blunt and Gillian Rose (1999) brings up Frye in *Writing Women and Space*

.... In that apartment, a woman can speak with authority and be heard more easily in the kitchen because under the patriarchal division of labour this is the space in which she has the greatest authority, but in the bedroom she is not to be eloquent with her mind but only with her body, for these she exists for her husband's pleasure. (2)

Looking back, it can be examined that the Second World War negated myths and belief structures of which the humanity was the first casualty. During such a time to stand for a different humanistic approach in terms of marriage, business relationships and political struggles appeared to be a daunting task on part of Sahgal's courage. The centrality of women characters in her dramatic events demanded that self be defined afresh. It was challenging for Sahgal to infuse the passive goodness with the fiery energy and dynamism of her women characters in order to project substance in their entity.

Women, as the members of a 'Second sex' have been represented in literature with reference to the social and cultural gendering under-taken by them in a male patriarchal society. The struggle undergone by a woman writer is based on overcoming the hurdle of being an object. The deconstruction of gender and female stereotypes, the deliberate bordering of the female consciousness and the notion to give to woman a new subjective position led to a re-examination of how women are really represented in literature and culture and how this control a wide range of human relations. The woman exists as a colonized element in the patriarchy, always serving the Man with loyalty. The normal process of creation is reversed in the Christian myth where the scriptures present how Eve comes out of Adam's rib. It is he who christens her. He calls her "Woman" for being 'come of my, bones and flesh of my flesh', and 'Eve' for being life-bearer the "mother of all living" (Singh 49). The woman from the time of Creation is perceived as sub-ordinate and is never seen as a being with desires and aspirations.

It can be witnessed that feminism has contributed to some of the most interesting interventions. It has not been victimized by the growing impact of post-modernism and post-structuralism. However the emphasis of feminism on gender has been constantly questioned by the post-modern critique. Women studies born in 1970s had its key contents highlighting on the familiarities among women's lives and constructed difference, primarily dealing with the void between men and women eventually resulting in the

marginalization of the 'poor and the disadvantaged women'. Women who were 'different' were dealt with 'normalised' absence and 'problematized' presence. As Elaine Marks (1975) observes in *New French Feminisms*:

Women must write her, must write about women, and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies- for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into the text-as into the world and into history by her own movement. (245)

Hence it can be concluded that the women writers' own predilection to portray them as sexually infirm and morally fallible exposes the writers' personal conventionality. The mainstream literature delineate constructed stereotype of the witch and bitch combine, an image of woman as mistress and seductress which is decoded in women's texts and expressed by their own conceptions of woman's image. But it is fundamentally politicization of the male gender roles postulated in the Gandhian ideology that nourishes the psychology of the female writers of that period. Women writers in both Hindi and Indo-English question the dominant sexual norms and enquire the role of sexuality in a woman's life. There supposes to be an overall radical change in sexual norms as well as the feminine image and the conventional literary character revised against the ideological patterns of dependence and independence.

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