Nayantara Sahgal has the distinction of being the first Indian woman novelist in English to deal with political themes. Her novels are set against the socio-political backdrop of the country and they attempt to capture the essence of the new political creed in the context of the passing of Gandhism and the disappearance of the ideological impulsions governing Nehruism. In the words of Lakshmi Sinha, “Sahgal’s literary world, …in a broad sense can be termed ‘personalized fiction’. History, politics, autobiography and personalities intermingle in the novels of Sahgal”. (Sinha, 42)

As the daughter of Ranjit Sitaram Pandit, a well-known freedom fighter of Independence Movement and Vijayalakshmi Pandit, the niece of Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, politics is Nayantara Sahgal’s background and environment. Though political milieu is the dominant setting in her novels, she says she has no ideology. She tries to explain what generally is meant by politics. “…politics—if by that we mean the use and misuse of power—invades our lives everyday, both at the private, domestic level and at the national level …Political awareness is thrust upon us.” (Sahgal, 82-83) It is justifiable to say, to use the words of M.L. Malhotra, that “Politics and Mrs.Sahgal are cousins German or if a metaphor can convey it more forcefully, Siamese twins”. (Malhotra, 214) Thus, she seeks to examine the misuse of power in the post-independence India in her **Rich Like Us**.
Nayantara Sahgal, in her writings, seeks to recreate the social and political scenes of pre and post Independence India. She concerns herself with men and women engaged in contemporary political life and aptly describes, interprets and analyses the forces which determine human destiny. If one considers only the themes of her novels, they can be called, no doubt, political novels. But they are more than just records of political events as they present a chronological account of Indian politics from the last phase of the freedom struggle to the breakdown of democracy in mid-seventies. Sahgal considers her novels to be political both in content and intention that she declares that “…each of the novels, more or less, reflects the political era we are passing through”. (Sahgal, 1976)

A clever intermingling of history and fiction can be recognised in Sahgal, gradually journeying from her first novel, A Time to be Happy (1957) up to her latest one, Lesser Breeds (2003). Nayantara Sahgal has the privilege to make an observation of Indian politics from close quarters and whatever she writes about politicians and bureaucrats is realistic and reliable as Naomi Michison opines that, “As Nayantara grew up she saw politics from the inside. This world is implicit in her novels”. (Michison, 1186-88)

This brings in Nayantara Sahgal’s own life and circumstances as relevant while considering her novels. All her childhood was spent in
Anand Bhavan at Allahabad with her parents, her maternal uncle, Jawaharlal Nehru and her cousin, Indira Gandhi. She grew up during the national movement. The family was so deeply involved in the freedom struggle that the political and the personal were inseparable in such an environment and it left a deep impression on her mind. Mrs. Sahgal clearly states that.

…the political situation is the background of all my books. I notice that no body else in India, atleast writing in English, has used the technique of having a political situation—a specific political situation as the backdrop of every single novel. There have been novels of political situation, isolated ones, but I have developed this as a genre, as a whole style of political novel, which uses political background but tells a story of human life against that …”. (Sahgal, 10)

Rich Like Us is considered one of the most ambitious and complex novels of Nayantara Sahgal. The novel’s political and artistic importance was recognized when it was awarded two prestigious awards, the Sinclair Prize for fiction in 1985 and the Indian Sahitya Akademi Award for the best book in English for the year 1986. The novel is dedicated to the “Indo-British experience and what its sharers have learned from each other”. (Sahgal, 3) It represents a situation in which, even after independence, a democratic leader usurps full power and almost begins to view with the earlier colonial rulers in repression
and economic exploitation. Jasbir Jain states that Rich Like Us “…reflects not only her personal values but also the changing values of a country exposed for the first time to both freedom and power”. (Jain, 9)

Emergency was declared in India on 26th June, 1975 and it lasted till March, 1977. Mrs. Indira Gandhi assumed absolute power for almost twenty months. This has been one of the political events which had far reaching impact on the post-independence Indian history. T.N. Dhar says that, “Sahgal throws up her cloak of disguise to make more than usual direct references to people and events, and expresses her disapproval of the emergency let loose on the country by Mrs. Indira Gandhi in unequivocal terms”. (Dhar,150) Sahgal’s Rich Like Us deals with the story of India of Mrs. Gahdhi’s Emergency, when power becomes arbitrary once more, when the corrupt and the opportunists flourish. It is also a story of an older India, of a generation who remember the British Raj and Partition, of the continuities and the ties of family, caste and religion.

When it was claimed by the Prime Minister that declaration of Emergency was primarily to help her in removing the poverty of the people, Sahgal seems to illustrate how it only helped for her and her son’s glorification while the poor are kept in their traditional place and on the underside of power. Emergency had different meanings for
different people. To some, it was opportunity, plenty and power. To others, it was the time for hero-worship, while for the common man it was simply exploitation and deprivation of even the most basic freedom. The civil servants and officers were reduced to “…cherry stones on a plate, not like people”. (Sahgal,104) or in the words of Sonali, the principal character, the “automatons” who were forced to indulge in corruption and corrupt practices to please handful of hangers-on. The civil servants were told to obey the orders of the government and were not expected to reply. The emergency brought pain, hardship and frustration for Sonali, a civil servant and Rose, the English wife of Ram L.Surya. The recurring image of the handless, helpless, struggling beggar in the street, dragged by society ladies into a mobile vasectomy clinic, symbolizes the state of affairs and the suppressed cries under the rule of rod. O.P. Mathur opines that “Rich Like Us is perhaps the only novel which subsumes the horrors of the Emergency in the consciousness of human beings affected by them”. (Mathur, 38)

Set in the backdrop of National Emergency of 1975, the novel depicts mainly political oppression. Initially, the absolute surrender to the “Supreme”, appears as a gateway to success, but very soon, Ravi Kachru realizes that it is very suffocating. In such a dreary and dismal situation, hope alone can sustain people. They can look forward to
bright future when Emergency would be over and people would be free to do as they would like to. “The Emergency had given all kinds of new twists and turns to policy and the world’s largest democracy was looking like nothing so much as one of the two-bit dictatorship we had loftily looked down upon”. (26)

A vivid account of the harassment, cruelty and injustice caused to people during the Emergency is powerfully portrayed in the novel. It deals with the effect of politics on the personal lives of people and studies the impact of Emergency on various characters. The action of this novel dates back to the period of India’s National Emergency during 1975 to 1977, when the parliament and constitution were in a state of suspended animation. In an interview Sahgal offers the following explanation for the change in her writing. She says,

The Emergency was turning point for me personally and therefore fictionally Rich Like Us was set against a background of the Emergency, that event released me from the ‘chronology’. I was engaged in writing novels with the contemporary political scene as a setting-because dictatorship was the end of that particular road, a dead end, in a sense. (Sahgal, 1988)

Thus Rich Like Us deals with the political events of the mid-seventies, the authoritarian pattern which was followed, and the
isolation it imposed. It is also about the causes which led to it. 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 value systems of the past. On the face of it, the Emergency is a reversal of all that the past has stood for the battles for freedom fought and won and all that sacrifice now come to this. It is an act of discontinuity, abandoning all earlier norms. It is a world gone awry, where “everything was not all right”. (22)

While tracing the impact of Emergency on a whole range of characters, it also seeks to highlight their responses to the social tension created by the Emergency. A vivid picture of India in Emergency is successfully evocated. The Emergency is only a month old when already there is “…sullness building up along New Delhi’s heavily roads”. (21) Emergency is associated with curtailing of freedom in various ways like censorship, erratic arrests, prevention of public meetings, forced vasectomy and finally ruthless suppression of all kinds of opposition. In short, it is sheer monopolization of power. Vijayasree refers to the theme of the novel in these words: “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 has put Democracy in
deep danger.” (Vijayasree, 22) Thus Sonali thinks for the first time of a future after the Emergency. Meenakashi Mukherjee, in a paper she read in a Sahitya Akademi Seminar, remarked about the novel thus:

The wealth of details in the novel, familiar Delhi scenes, dossiers on contemporary personages, typical emergency features—like the song on the twenty point programme—these, combined with Sahgal’s penchant for the neat and telling phrase do localize the novel in time and space, immortalize an era and give the impression of mimetic objectivity. (Mukherjee, 27)

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. Apart from the impact of Emergency on the country which is the main concern of the novel, Sahgal, incidentally deals with various periods in the country’s history—Sati, the freedom struggle, Gandhiji’s emancipator effort, the Second World War, the Partition and the communal frenzy associated with it and the gradual deterioration of moral values especially after the independence. The novelist evokes a very impressive picture of an oppressed and corrupt regime. She exposes the corrupt hypocritical bureaucracy which created terror in the innocent people and snatched
away their freedom of expression. The innocent people were imprisoned and the guiltily went unpunished though their crimes were detected because they knew people at the top.

The action of the novel revolves around “…many little victims the snapping jaws of the Emergency were claiming in the course of an ordinary working day”. (252) Small and big tyrants were produced by the Emergency like Dev, who proposed to launch a fizzy drink factory called ‘Happyola’. Dev, who was modelled on Sanjay Gandhi, represents the abuse of power and the corruption of Indian politics. The story centres round Sonali, the IAS topper who is the joint secretary in the Ministry of Industry. Dev, Ram’s son by his Indian wife Mona, and Ravi Kachru, IAS Officer are the principal characters while the others like Prime Minister and her staff look large in the background since the declaration of Emergency. These characters represent the common predicament shared by the majority in the period of National Emergency. There are other characters and other points of view which show the helplessness of the bewilderment of the past in the face of the new uncertain future like Dev’s father-in-law, Kishori Lal and Sonali’s father, Keshav Renede. Kishori Lal, who is a researcher turned shopkeeper, tries to get over the pain of the torture of being severely whipped for nothing in his own way: “Thank heavens whips were not
what one calls torture. Ordinary village school masters used whips and he was grateful now he had plenty used on him”. (207) Rose’s part of the story is narrated in the third person, with Sonali’s first-person narration moving to and fro between the past and present. There is also the middle ground inhabited by Dev, Rose’s stepson, and Ravi Kachru, Sonali’s childhood friend, colleague and one time suitor. The meeting point is provided by the foreign collaborator, Neuman. The chief characters are both individuals and representatives of their respective classes.

The objectives and the functioning of the Emergency and its effects on the lives of the people have been glaringly exposed and the nexus between politics, business and crime has been clearly revealed. Sahgal plunges direct into the objectives of the Emergency which consists of the totalitarian ruler’s ambition of a dictatorship being considered ‘natural’ and ensuring of hereditary succession which is also considered ‘natural’. Now the country is ruled by “…one and a half people”. (33) that is Mrs.Gandhi and her son, Sanjay Emergency is “…a disguised masquerade to prepare the country for family rule”. (23) In the words of Jasbir Jain, it envisaged “…an isolated, insulated and perhaps a barren world, where personal and public reasons get mingled and severance takes place between ends and means”. (Jain, 28-29) An editor,
a typical representative of the subservient press of the Emergency, says, “Madam had in good faith thought it her constitutional duty to override the constitution”. (103)

The farmers and the workers are exploited and the resources of the whole nation are quietly washed off for the benefit of a few. There is exploitation galore. In forced vasectomy camps even the old and the unmarried are not spared. All this ugly reality is given cosmic touches. There is a pretence of discipline, punctuality and efficiency accompanied by a hypocritical public and private swearing by the ancient Indian scriptures, myths and ideals and repeated references to Mahatma Gandhi and assertions to serve the masses. A lawyer gives his professional opinion “…that the constitution would have to be drastically amended, it not rewritten, to give Madam powers to fight disruptive forces and crush the vested interests she had been battling against since infancy”. (103) The millennium had arrived disguised as an emergency with a twenty—point programme in whose support a number of delegations,

…of teachers, lawyers, schoolchildren and so on and so fourth who went every day to congratulate the Prime Minister for declaring it. …The general public were taken to the lawn; people like herself were shown into an oval anteroom. She took a chair and sat looking at the wall above
the heads of those facing her. …There wasn’t time before an audience with the Leader to think about anything because at any minute the door might open and the next person be asked to go in. But they shared the mystical glow of people doing the right patriotic thing, or pilgrims who had journeyed far and hazardously to kiss the big toe already worn out with pilgrim kisses. (87-88)

Inspite of controlled press and newsless newspapers, there are whispering campaigns and open protests. A citizen’s hands are cut and he was to be a handless beggar for life. Even in the bureaucracy there are sensitive souls like Sonali who refuses to be a party to all this corruption and outrage against human dignity even though they may have to quit the service.

Sahgal views the emergency as an event which marks a clean break from past like the room of Dev with total anonymity, as it bore “No echo of things past or thing to come”. (2) It is a strange vaccum, where nameless people fit among strong power symbols of imported cars and the delicate clink of Belgian crystal and scotch whisky, five times more expensive than Indian whisky. The declaration of Emergency witnesses the fast exchange of power from mother to the son, leading to the beautification of the imperial city by blowing up tenements, vasectomising the masses and setting up youth camps. Sonali heard about how criminals were being blinded by the police with
needles dipped in acid as punishment for all types of crimes. When she noticed brutal treatment towards a boy on a public road, she wonders how people could bear what she calls “this bogus emergency”.

T.N. Dhar comments,

One of the dismal features of the times, the novel stresses, was that Madam, (Mrs.Gandhi in the novel) succeeded in getting the support of lawyers, professors, newspaper editors, and other liberal and progressive groups for her unrestricted use of power. (Dhar, 153)

As an active supporter of the new regime, Dev declares arrogantly to the foreign guest, Neuman, that the Emergency has been a boon for the country. He continues effusively that the opposition has been wiped off and with power in the hands of one person, the country would move towards progress in full steam. In this maze, the bureaucracy treads nimbly along, moving deeper into the labyrinth of power without glancing back. The distinction between politics and service becomes blurred, with the two sides hopelessly mixed together.

The host, Dev, justifies to the foreign business contact, Neuman, that the declaration of an Emergency in India, has paved the way for ventures such as the opening of a new factory, ostensibly for the production of a fizzy drink happyola. Dev and his wife Nishi are entertaining a foreign guest, Neuman, a collaborator in the proposed
Happyola factory. What brings them together is their concern for making money. Neuman has come to India in search of a market, and Dev is the Indian collaborator. The discourse polarizes around the new business ethic which gains support from blind supporters of the Emergency like Dev, and the Joint Secretary, Minister for Industry, Ravi Kachru, who is the perfect liaison man. As they wait for Ravi Kachru who is an important bureaucrat and part of the “conveyor belt that had delivered the cash into the Minister for industry, relatively minor graft in terms of big investment and the returns expected from it”. (14-15) Neuman observes the Indian passion and craze for things imported. The confinement to the present is Dev’s strength, the Emergency’s aim and the country’s weakness. At one stage in the novel, Rose thinks of Dev as a person who had,

…nothing in his head except the present. There is no more to him than that … no dreams at all. Even -- especially--the mad have dreams. He hasn’t even the saving grace of natural, harmless madness. Locked up in the present like in a cell, he’s a lunatic of another kind, cut off from continuity before or behind. (177)

While Dev and Neuman wait for Ravi to join them, Rose talks to Neuman about her husband’s business practices. She tells him about their life in Lahore and her father-in-law’s practical attitude to business.
He had no need for contacts or contracts. Her husband, even when he socialized, retained the element of dependability in business deals. There is, in this, an implied comparison with Dev’s method of working and the new political control of business deals. People like Ram and his father were getting rare as if they belonged to an extinct species. Rose thinks to herself; “Human beings. Like there don’t seem to be anymore”. (6) Ram is not dead, but he is lying upstairs paralyzed after having suffered a stroke brought on by the misdeeds of his son. Ram’s paralytic condition is only one of the indications of things having gone wrong. It is almost, as if, all the men have been emasculated, paralyzed or rendered impotent.

Ram is helpless and so was Sonali’s father, Keshav Ranade-helpless and ineffectual. Overpowered by his domineering wife, he withdraws from life and its affairs long before he actually dies. He retreats into a private little world of memories and failed idealism, and when the Emergency is declared, it acts like a catastrophe which releases his hold on life. Another of the same kind is Kishore Lal, Nishi’s father, who has allowed his need to earn a living and support a family of five daughters to overcome his political and intellectual interests. Indifferent to the new policies, if not directly hostile, he finds himself in a prison, a confinement which is a further narrowing down of his life. Kishore Lal refuses to get released from prison on the recommendation of his politically influential son-in-law.
Dev, very selfish and crafty thinks conveniently that emergency brought stability to the country. He justifies it on economic and business considerations when he says,

...this emergency is just what we needed. The trouble makers are in jail. An opposition is something we never needed. The way the country is being run now, with one person giving the orders, and no one being allowed to make a fuss about it in the cabinet or in parliament, means that things can go full steam ahead without delays and weighing pros and cons forever. Strikes are banned. (2)

The Emergency, as Dev points out, has done away with conscience. Though he himself is not able to see it, his comments throw light on the real horror of the Emergency for it does not allow any mirrors, reflections, or images. At least it sets out to destroy all comment. In a way, Dev’s action of forging his father’s signatures on the cheques is the kind of activity which may happen at the historical level. Keshav was worried about this, “What galled him most, and this he did talk about, was that history would now be revised and rewritten. All dictatorships meddled with history”. (199) Dev, forger of his father’s signature, has been appointed Cabinet Minister, having played his role in supporting the emergency.
The Emergency is viewed with a ‘double’ vision-the objective narration of the novelist and the filter of Sonali’s consciousness. The moral and political stances of both are the same and so one perspective reinforces the other. Sonali and Rose are typical Sahgal’s women, though they belong to two different generations, class and race. They are independent, assertive, self-respecting, conscientious and compassionate. Each of them tells us how the private world simultaneously affects and changes her life permanently. Their experiences often run parallel, especially during the Emergency. On a few occasions, the two women seem to function as the writer’s mouth-piece, especially on matters of social significance. Sahgal almost seems to use Rose as her mouth-piece in relation to the ridiculous and unnecessary exercise, during the Emergency, of capturing people and taking them to vasectomy camps. Rose protests when the beggar, who has no arms, is nearly forced in this way by Nishi, Dev’s wife. Rose finally manages to resist Nishi, saying, “It’s no use taking him, he is not even a whole man. He won’t count”. (98) Vijaya Sree remarks that “Nayantara Sahgal chooses a very effective narrative device for the authentic portrayal of the contemporary socio-political chaos—the double perspective – the omniscient author’s stance is alternated by the participant – narrator view point”. (Vijayasree, 26)

Sahgal also uses Rose’s personal problems successfully to highlight the frustrations of those who lived in the reign of terror during
the Emergency. The subversive laws release men like Dev of any crime, from the forging of Ram’s cheques to the murder of Rose. Rose, the London-born second wife of a rich businessman, could be seen as epitomizing this ideal of redemption through personal courage. Firstly, she takes a huge risk in marrying Ram and coming with him to India, even though she knows he is already married. Rose saves Ram’s first wife, Mona, from suicide and inspite of their initial antagonism, befriends her. Rose helps the crippled beggar whose arms and legs have been broken by the landlord whom he was trying to oppose. Makarand Paranjape opines that this incident reveals the suppression of the Indian masses by the brute force of the ruling classes. Rose is the only one who befriends the beggar and treats him like a human being, who is neglected by the family. (Paranjape, 187) Her outspokenness and cockney bluntness, makes her unpalatable to her step-son, Dev, when he is making deals with the new regime and secretly importing car parts for Mrs.Gandhi’s son under cover of his soft drink factory. Rose is a brave woman, but she is doomed by her honesty and by her uncertain position in Dev’s household after her husband is incapacitated by illness.

Rose is another person to suffer injustice and even death, during the Emergency. She is Ram’s English wife, who has been humiliated and robbed of even a decent living allowance by Dev, who keeps drawing money from the joint account of Ram and Rose by forging the signature of his paralyzed father. Sonali’s efforts to help Rose prove
ultimately useless. The bank manager is aware of the forgery but expresses his inability to stop it. It would have been suicide for him to do so. Dev’s forgery, brought to light on account of the intercession of Sonali on behalf of Rose, is a symbol of the transgressed code. It is one more instance of the naked abuse of authority. The consequence of Kachru’s attempt to save Rose by preventing further forgery is forsakenness. Kachru’s final disillusionment characterises a state of things falling apart.

Rose was found dead in a well. The suggestion of “..walking blindfolded off a gang-plank into the deep blue sea” (38-39) comes prophetically true when Sonali learns from the beggar, a mute spectator to this ghastly scene, how Rose was blindfolded and cast into the well nearby. The beggar too, in utter dismay, is involved in a “conspiracy of silence”. The unstated implication of the novel seems to be that it is not so much the Rose-Sonali identification which saves the beggar, though it might give him a new hope of brighter future, but his unavoidable silence for life’s sake. Rose’s murder was, as though, protected by the ramparts of political power and it is beyond the common reach of justice.

Contrasted with Dev’s absorption in the present is Sonali’s preoccupation with the past. The political theme is presented in Rich
Like Us mainly through the consciousness of Sonali Ranade, a middle-aged single woman, who is an IAS officer in the Ministry of Industries. She believes that for the woman’s liberation movement to take place in India, their education should being about rational civilized changes. She has grown up in a world which had fostered idealism. “She is quite candid about not understanding “poly-ticks” but that never prevents her from delivering judgements very close to the bone”. (33) She is unable to shift here alignments to accommodate the new requirements, and is taken by surprise by the suddenness of them all. Sonali herself has a system of ideals which are severely shaken by the events of 1976. Earlier the civil servants act as the steel framework of the government, now it has been made to crack so as to support the façade of the Emergency. Sonali talks about the attitude of the civil servants towards the Emergency:

We knew this was no emergency. If it had been, the priorities would have been quite different. 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 … (23-24)
Sonali finds herself an alien in this political world. She is nurtured on the values imbided from her father, on non-violence and truth of the Mahatma. She cannot keep up the charade of the Emergency and bluntly calls it a ‘fraud’ and considers it an atrocity perpetrated on the people. Ravi Kachru and Sonali represent the polarities of the system. Sonali considers her old friend Ravi Kachru, one of those civil servants, who had begun to play politics “…as if their life depended upon it”. (23) The civil servants become instruments in the hands of the political bosses and carry out their wishes without questioning, like Ravi Kachru.

Sonali’s commitment is closer to reality, and she refuses to be carried away by ideology. Later she sees that “…only the cloudless commitment, like the perfect relationship, could be knocked sideways with a feather. It was doubts and uncertainties that kept things alive and kicking”. (261) Not knowing the secret deal between the minister and a foreign businessman and his Indian collaborator about the setting up of a fizzy drink factory, she writes an unfavourable note on the file because the project is unimportant for the country and it is wasteful of precious foreign exchange. Sonali does not know that the project is the tip of an iceberg, for it is really a cover-up for the import and storage of car parts required for the manufacture of an indigenous car by the Prime Minister’s younger son. The factory is now quickly established, of course, not without the payment of a lot of Indian and foreign money to the Minister, who receives it through his daughter-in-law.
The Indian entrepreneur involved in this shady business is Dev, the son of an old prosperous businessman, now totally paralyzed. Dev becomes a highly successful entrepreneur to the amazement of his step mother.

What you call enter-prennesship 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. (5)

The Minister, who clears the project of Dev claims: “A humble follower of Gandhi was what he still remained though the journey had taken him and the country from Mahatma to Madam”. (49)

Sonali’s strong sense of service receives a blow when she is demoted from her responsible position in the civil service because she refuses permission for a “Preposterous proposal, requiring the import of more or less an entire factory”. (24) She realizes that her administrative training has not prepared her for handling the new situation which has arisen out of political concerns dominating the administration.

Once upon a time we had thought of the civil services as “We” and politicians as “they” – two different sides of the coin. We were bound by more than discipline we partook of a mystique. Our job was to stay free of the political circus. We were successors to the ICS, the “steel frame” the British had ruled India with, but with more on our hands since
Independence than the steel frame had in two hundred years… The distinction between politics and the service had become so blurred over the last few years it had all but disappeared. The two sides were hopelessly mixed, with politicians meddling in administration and favorites like Kachru, the prime example, playing politics as if his life depended on it (22-23)

The characters of the novel seem to be divided between “we” and “they”, and Sonali, along with the novelist, belongs to “we”, who are characterized by the resonance of sensitive comprehension and comprehensiveness. This literacy device of narration makes us view the emergency as it operates in the lives of women like Rose and Sonali bringing out the contrast between their rich personalities and the stark ugliness of the world. The strength and resilience of an individual like Sonali is demonstrated by the fact that the oppressive environment can repel but not change her. It is observed as one of the strands making the individual personality richer and stronger moulded in its shaping even by those forces which were initially alien to it.

Sonali finds herself impossible to continue to work in such a corrupt environment, in any case. She refuses to be a party to the silent sycophancy and continues to fight as an administrator against the whole system. “The Emergency had finished my career, but suddenly I did not
want a career in the crumbling un-professionalism that bowed and scraped to a bogus Emergency”. (32) Sonali is transferred to her home state on a lower post and her successor, Ravi Kachru, takes over as Joint Secretary. She is demoted, punished and humiliated. Kachru always manages to be on the right side of power, by keeping out of controversies and avoiding wrong turns, and sailing smoothly with the current, “Kachru of course would get through any charade with finesses. It was the realities that floored him”. (26) Within a few years, Ravi is making his way up hierarchy, and during the Emergency, he is one of Mrs.Gandhi’s favourites, the higher up it make sense to ask for favours. By the end of the novel, he has fallen from political grace but has finally attained the maturity to be honest on a personal level.

In Sonali, we find a woman whose life is affected by the various twists and turns of Indian politics. During the Emergency, her strong opinions on democracy cost her job, an event she accepts as symptomatic of changing times. Yet how helpless the times have made her can be seen when she can do nothing to stop Dev from forging Ram’s cheques. Her decision to resign from the civil services is clearly her refusal to compromise with dictatorship. Authoritarian governments rest themselves on the support and silence of the civil servants, like Ravi Kachru. Sonali, however, is different. She says “When the constitution
becomes null and void by the act of a dictator and the armour of a modern state confronts you, *Satyagraha* is the only way to keep your self-respect*. (198) Sahgal’s in her **Meet the Author** address, organized by the Sahitya Akademi, in 1988 says, “…The new woman … is determined to live, and to live in self-respect. Her virtue is courage, which is a willingness to risk the unknown and to face the consequences”. (Sahgal, 84) This new woman could be Sonali also. Later, when Marcella encourages Sonali to help her husband with some research work in India, Sonali takes up her new job and concentrates in decorative arts of one of the most glorious periods of medieval India, from the mid-seventeenth to the mid-eighteenth century. As she gets down to work studying Indian history, she feels young and alive again. A new victory is injected into her veins, she is now preparing for the future “…with my own century stretched out before me, waiting to be lived”. (301)

Sahgal shows the erosion of values of the politicians and bureaucrats during the emergency of India. She knows that India is ruled by politicians and bureaucrats and has given an example of the old ICS officers like Keshav Renede, an honest civil servant, as opposed to this new type of bureaucrats like Ravi Kachru, an opportunist and Sonali, a committed officer. But during the emergency, there is no place for
sincere and honest officers like Sonali in the new regime. Kiranjeet Kaur says that “…the strength of Sahgal’s novel is in her honest upholding of human values. Sonali feels more humane and less bureaucratic when she talks to Rose from her desk before she bids farewell to her office”. (Kaur, 32)

The novel brings to light the deterioration in public life during the Emergency of 1975-77. It demonstrates, how in a single sweep, the whole value system is totally erased. Jasbir Jain writes, “Rich Like Us offers no easy solutions to mankind’s problems, on the contrary it challenges all known solutions…finally Rich Like Us is about the complex nature of reality”. (Jain,34) As John Mellors rightly points out “At last Nayantara Sahgal’s imagination and skill do full justice to the intensity of her beliefs and her passion for truth and freedom”. (Mellors,144 )

Sahgal manages to bring together happily her gifts as journalist and novelist reporting the contemporary socio-political situation as it exists while changing the same into the imaginatively rich stuff of novelistic reality. In Rich Like Us one finds an intermingling of the individual and contemporary politics and how the suffocating political environment bears down upon the lives of a few sensitive people. Jasbir Jain comments,
Sahgal analyses and interprets variegated aspects of political life in depth and through her active involvement in politics she emphasizes the humanistic values she upholds and the novel becomes a concern for the quality of life. Her concern with politics is just a part of her humanistic concern because each of her explorations into political life reveals her newer and deeper insight into the human psyche. (Jain, 141)

Sahgal effectively portrays the ills of the contemporary society with the delineation of the moral dilemmas as well as with the aesthetic difficulties of conveying a positive message of action in the fictional format. She also highlights the need for intellectual and practical action to bring about efficacious changes in the contemporary society. If “…a writer who writes straight is an architect of history’. (8) as John Dos Passors holds, Sahgal’s Rich Like Us finds her a place among the “architects of history.” Each of her novels represents the political atmosphere of the period in which she was writing. Thus her involvement in Indian politics is embedded in her ‘bones and marrow’ and in her “emotional and intellectual make up”. (Sahgal, 44)

In Rich Like Us, Mrs. Sahgal presents in undeniable terms how the senior congress leaders of the Gandhian era failed the country by allowing antisocial forces enter into the folds of the congress that acted only as election gambits that worked. It is the entrance of this power
seekers into the congress that culminated into the imposition of Emergency. She finally points out that there is a need to study the history of pre-Independence India to look for a solution to the present situation.

Sahgal seems “…to suggest that in situations of oppression and tyranny, history can provide a means of hope, not just for surviving, but for getting enthused to fight, for the worst of tyrants had ultimately to yield to popular will. …because it affirms that the forces of resistance ultimately triumphed”. (Dhar, 156) Sonali takes strength from her father’s bold act of preventing a woman from being burnt as a Sati, when he was just a nineteen year old boy. She is also strongly influenced by her great grand father, a strong man with liberal views. She remembers what he told a British officer during a discussion on the issue of Sati:

…what was needed was a crusade with all passion and fever.
…old evils will go on into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries because no torch has been lit, and because you, who have the opportunity, don’t seize the moment and break the back of evil when you have the chance. (123-24)

Asha Choubey believes that “these words serve as becam light for Sonali”. (Choubey 102) She juxtaposes the acts of injustice and cruelty
of the past with those in the emergency regime of contemporary times. She refuses to compromise herself with the emergency and comments, “Not all of us are passive before cruelty and depravity”. (152) She recalls how recorded examples of cruelty in the past were fought. Now she realizes the need to fight the cruelty of the present. Thus there is hope for a better and bright future. Mini Nanda, voices a similar opinion when she says “…the ending of the novel offers hope and a certain confidence and affirmation”. (Nanda, 187)
WORKS CITED


