Chapter Four

Religio-Cultural Issues: An Investigation of

Nayantara Sahgal’s Select Novels

“I love you when you bow in your mosque, kneel in your temple, pray in your church. For you and I are sons of one religion, and it is the spirit.”

– Kahlil Gibran

Culture is broadly defined as acquired knowledge, beliefs, art, morals, law, customs, capabilities and habits. The term culture has an astonishing number of definitions from popular and academic sources. According to one expert, Raymond Williams, “Culture is one of the two or three most complicated words in English language . . . because it has now come to be used for important concepts in several distinct intellectual disciplines and in several distinct systems of thought” (qtd in Smith 1). From the sixteenth century until the nineteenth, the term began to be widely applied to the improvement of the individual human mind and personal manners through learning. For this reason, we can still speak of someone as being “cultured” or if they are uncouth as “having no culture”. During this period, the term began to refer also to the improvement of society as a whole, with culture being used as a value-laden synonym for “civilization”. As Clifford Geertz remarks in “Religion as a Cultural System”: 
The term ‘culture’ has by now acquired a certain aura of ill-repute in social anthropological circles because of the multiplicity of its referents and the studied vagueness with which it has all too often been invoked . . . . In any case the culture concept to which I adhere has neither multiple referents nor, so far as I can see, any unusual ambiguity: it denotes an historically transmitted pattern of meaning embodied in symbols, as a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate and develop their knowledge about and attitudes towards life. (89)

Indian civilization has had a pluralistic character from the start. Ethnic origins, religions and languages are the major sources of cultural diversity. India with her rich natural resources had always remained a centre of attraction to many powerful kingdoms and dynasties from different directions of the globe, which contributed to the shaping of India’s culture. “Unlike several others lands where the dominant human cultures have tended to absorb or eliminate others, in India the tendency has been to nurture diversity, which has been favoured by the diversity of the country’s ecological regimes” (Gadgil and Guha n.pag.).

Ethnicity which is associated with race in which human beings are identified as biological types – white, black and brown – according to the colours of their skin, form the cause of cultural diversity in India, as language and religion. Ethnicity comes from the Greek “ethnos” meaning nation. The individual members of an ethnic group experience a kind of coerciveness, because everything they share is almost given. A moderate view suggests that
ethnicity demands from its members to preserve the heritage of their ancestors and respond to the world around them with genuine ethnic wisdom. Sometimes this ethnicity creates a pride in the race, as the white race, which is traditionally considered as superior and civilized compared to other races. Because of this, several white writers have stigmatized the black and brown races and helped the white imperial powers to legitimize their control over non-whites. Early British writings about India are not as bleak as they are about Africa.

In fact, in the writing of the west, “black” refers to the non-west in general and the African in particular. Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks* defends his countrymen:

> They have emerged from a particular cultural milieu and reflect the concerns and prejudices of that culture and world view. If western civilization and culture are responsible for colonial racism, and Europe itself has a racist structure, then we should not be too surprised to find this racism reflected in the discourses of knowledge that emanate from this civilization and that they work to ensure that structural dominance is maintained. (XV)

Fanon in this book examines the psychology of the colonists and the colonized. It examines how colonialism is internalized by the colonized, how an inferiority complex is inculcated and how black people end up emulating their oppressors. It is the same thing which happened in India too. But the British writers were well aware of India’s rich civilizational past, its art, architecture and culture, yet they were sure of their superiority too. Their belief in their racial superiority led them to carry the “whitemen’s burden” of civilizing the others.
However Nayantara Sahgal doesn’t agree to this view. In her essay “India’s Identity in Mistaken Identity” she says:

Then it is also about the fact that there is no pure race and no such thing as ethnic purity; that cultures have crisscrossed and blood streams have mingled so that this interweave can never again be unwoven. The human race is mixed. It is impure . . . . So all talk of purity and superiority is nonsense everywhere . . . as Hitler’s theory of a pure race was, or ideas of ethnic cleansing today, or indeed ideas of keeping Europe a white fortress. (51)

Cultural diversity is nurtured in India mainly by the different religions and language. Religion is a major part of culture which dictates behaviour, values and a whole way of life. Religious culture tends to offer several meaning based dimensions that define life and the human existence. Religion and spirituality help us to understand our self, achieve self-actualization and to satisfy our higher needs. India is the birth place of several religions and the diversity of religions in India is worth recording. It is rare to find such a representation from almost all the major religions of the world. While India is the cradle of Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism, Islam too has a long tradition of existence. By the twelfth century India began to have Islamic bases as wave after wave of Islamic groups came down to India. Ananda K.Coomaraswamy puts forward this composite view in unambiguous terms: “It would hardly be possible to think of an India in which no great Mughal had ruled, no Taj been built or to which Persian art and literature were wholly foreign” (qtd. in Panikkar para 7). Out of
the fusion of two cultures arose the Urdu language – an amalgam of Persian and Hindi.

With the European colonial expansion and nation building, Christian missionary expanded Christianity came to India with St. Thomas who brought the teachings of Jesus along with him in 50 A.D. But only with the colonial expansion, many Indians were converted to Christianity as a step in the civilizing mission. In fact religious conversions began as a justification for economic plunder. As Laura E. Donaldson notes in “God, Gold and Gender”, “While many countries occupied and dominated foreign territories, only the group of nations claiming Christian identity implemented a global colonial system upon which the sun never set” (522). Michael Prior too echoes the same idea in “The Bible and Colonialism” where he says,

> The social transformation resulting from the decision to encroach on a foreign terrain reflects the determination of the colonizers to alter radically a region’s politics in favour of the colonist and the introduction of Christianity functioned as a powerful tool of such transformation. (qtd. in Donaldson 522)

In spite of the cultural and religious diversity, the people of India maintained their distinct identities with strong friendly links with other population of the regions. The sharing of space, regional ethos and cultural traits cut across religions and sectarian differences, and bound the local people together. It was the civilizational frame work which provided the unity amongst the people of the land in the past. Sharing of space and culture traits indeed has been an ancient phenomenon in India, mainly on account of internal movements,
migrations, pilgrimage and regular cultural exchanges. People visited sacred
centres all over the country and thus a process of continuous interaction operated
continually at the grassroots and sharing of culture and religious traits, thoughts
and ethos contributed to cultural synthesis. Indian society is rightly described as a
“honeycomb” in which “communities are engaged in vibrant interaction, sharing
space, ethos and cultural traits” (Singh 111). However, “the fact that Hindus and
Muslims (and other religious groups) had ‘neighbourly relations’ for long periods
does not mean that they revelled in social intermixing” (Kaviraj 189). A peaceful
syncretic culture in precolonial India was only an idealized representation of the
past by the nationalist leaders to bring about a unity among the different groups.

Nayantara Sahgal’s idea regarding India’s cultural diversity falls in line
with Singh’s. She says in “India’s Identity in Mistaken Identity”:

And it is about a belief in an India where there is no Hindu and no
Muslim, only a shared tradition created and enriched by a fabulous
joint culture, by people who have lived as good neighbours side by
side for centuries. This broad universal approach is in fact the
meaning of being Indian, for India is a many-faceted diamond
reflecting all the light and splendour that has come her way. (51)

Considering the present state of India where religio-cultural issues seem to divide
India, with the emergence of selfish politicians on the scene, Nayantara Sahgal’s
“a fabulous joint culture” seems to be a dream. Yet Sahgal doesn’t give up hope.
She doesn’t fail to acknowledge India’s unique culture in her article “The Ink Is
Soiled”, where she says, “I thought of a wonderful sentence of Nirmal Verma’s in
an interview he gave about ten years ago. He said that India had two great epics,
the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* but that its third great epic was the culture we call Indian . . .” (para 3). To Sahgal, it is this composite, many-faceted culture which has no parallel anywhere. She adds in the same article:

> If it is alive after 5,000 years, we know it is because it has remained open and assimilative . . . I am a Hindu by accident of birth, but half-muslim by culture, not to mention all the Christian, Buddhist and atheist influences that are an integral part of my Indianness. We have so far rejected the call for a monoculture and chosen to cherish all the stands that have gone into the making of our modern identity. (para 3)

Sahgal is well aware of the separatist movement that mars the unity of the nation and she captures all these socio political and religio-cultural threats in her novels. Sahgal is a staunch supporter of democratic ideals and she is of the view of her uncle Jawaharlal Nehru, in identifying secularism as the only approach which would guarantee the development of a truly integrated nation. Nehru said that secularism did not mean “absence of religion but putting religion on a different plane from that of normal political and social life. Any other approach in India would mean the breaking up of India” (Nehru 331). At the centre of Indian secular state ideology was not an irreligious or anti-religious state, but rather a non-sectarian state, which did not privilege one religion over another. The secular ideology can be summed up in the Sanskrit expression *sarva dharma samabhava* which means that all religions should be treated equally. But Nehru himself was a silent witness to the Indian constitution which provided different
civil codes for Hindus, Muslims and Christians. The absence of uniform civil
code creates many problems in post independent India till this date.

The development of modern India with its multi-lingual, multi-religious,
composite culture, formulates some key themes in the mind of Indian English
novelists starting from nineteenth century and continuing till now. The recurrent
themes are colonialism, nationalism, partition, independence, regionalism,
communalism, religion, caste, urbanization, feminism, capitalism, socialism,
globalization etc. The theme which holds a good sway over the imagination of
Indian writers is the conflict that rises between tradition and modernity. Modern
India could be considered as a society in transition, a great tradition modernising
itself. The writers of this age reveal their stance, as traditional or modern. Many
women novelists welcome the changes, though traditional in their outlook. They
are well aware of the limitations and problems faced by women in India, yet they
prefer the traditional garb for their protagonists. Among them, Nayantara
Sahgal’s stand is ambivalent. Krishna Rao remarks in his work *Nayantara
Sahgal:*

She doesn’t however go with Mulkraj [sic] Anand in making loud
and strident protest against the concept of conformity to tradition
in favour of some alien idea of social justice; On the contrary, she
dives deep into the sustaining springs of the composite cultural
tradition of India and comes up to affirm that aspect of Indian
tradition which possesses and promises a survival value. She is
thus neither an out and out conformist nor a thoroughbred
non-conformist . . . . She accepts the composite character of the
Indian tradition and affirms its catholicity which allows for human being a maximum freedom. (91-92)

According to Sahgal, tradition in India is mainly a religious one. It refers to Hinduism – that set of beliefs and practices which determine the mental make-up of most Indians. It is the religion of the majority in India, which is not confined to temples or other places of worship; it is a way of life. It is responsible for individual behaviour particularly women’s behaviour within the family and in marriage. Indirectly religion influences political attitudes and how a particular culture responds to corruption and abuse of power. However, Sahgal feels that the combined legacy of Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru has left a positive tradition in politics to be emulated by the posterity. Sahgal supports Gandhian political principles like truth, non-violence, social justice, prayer, simplicity and satyagraha which have a religious tinge, and Nehruvian emphasis on socialism, democracy and progress. Moreover tradition has a telling effect on the values and life choices of the main characters in her novels.

According to Sahgal, the behaviour of individuals, especially women, and the decisions they take at crucial junctures in their lives depend on this system of beliefs and practices called Hinduism. Hinduism being a dominant creed, plays several roles as a motivating force of action, as a crippling influence in inaction and passivity, as a wide spectrum of belief and rituals, as a lofty philosophy assimilated into the body of Hinduism etc. Sahgal differs from her uncle Nehru, in the subject of religion. She affirms her faith in Hinduism but feels sorry for Hinduism, for with its classical philosophical form, it has dwindled into a religion of popular practice and rituals. According to S.C. Dube “Hinduism . . . as it is
practiced, is not the Hinduism of the classical philosophical systems of India for it possesses neither the metaphysical heights nor the abstract content of the latter” (qtd. in Bhatnagar 73). Religions of Hebraic family like Judaism, Christianity and Islam preached man’s duty towards his fellow men, whereas the Hindu family of religions like Jainism, Buddhism and Sikhism stress an individual’s duty towards himself and God, or “the inner self”. Hence Hindus develop qualities like evasiveness, fatalism, inaction, patient wait for a change, self-centredness, discrimination and even exploitation. The notion of fatalism was more a method of rationalising past failures than a determinant of present behaviour. However the scope of fatalism would affect an individual’s inherent ability to act, and this is well portrayed by Sahgal in *The Day in Shadow* where Simrit quietly accepts the burden of financial settlement that enslaves her with taxes and makes it impossible for her to make a decent living. In her article “My New Novel: *The Day in Shadow*” Sahgal writes that she is “willing to accept it as part of her Karma. Simrit is symbolic of the Hindu race” (17).

She adds further in the same article:

Hinduism must change, revitalize itself if Hindus are to become an active positive breed with something to give the world and not to be swept away by alien tides. It may not be fashionable to talk of religion or to be a believer but I have never been in the least concerned about fashion or conformity. I am a believer in the greatest and most comprehensive metaphysics known to man – Hinduism – and in its powerful potential to provide men and women with a buoyant base for action. (18)
Sahgal confirms her belief in Hinduism. Her early novels like *A Time to Be Happy* and *This Time of Morning* stress more on the values stressed by Hinduism. The narrator’s idea regarding “Karma” in *A Time to be Happy* is reflected by Kailas in *This Time of Morning* when he gives a convincing answer to Rakesh who is puzzled over his chaotic heritage, that Hinduism “was the majesty of the mind engaged in life long combat with the senses” (*Morning* 53). Moreover it was “a living light faith” and many of the “kings had given all their riches in charity” (*Morning* 53). Sahgal’s later novels, however, give a different picture. Her western education enables her to compare Hinduism with Christianity in *The Day in Shadow*. Her schizophrenic mind is well evident in the comparison:

> What a fabulous inheritance, he marvelled, one nearly two thousand years old, the other immeasurably older and, we still keep them apart, in different boxes, as if wisdom could be so apportioned and have the benefit it was meant to. It had to be joined – united in an ocean of strength if it was to combat the genius of Marx. (*Shadow* 201)

In her first novel *A Time to Be Happy* (1958), the clash between the western and eastern culture is obvious in the words of the narrator who describes the Indians’ identity who have come under the western impact as ambivalent: “Indian with an English gloss, as I have said, like Yorkshire pudding served on a thal” (5). The novelty and incongruity of the comparison appeals to the readers. Similarly the image of incongruity and absurdity of the super-imposition of English culture on the cultured situation in India is sustained by Sahgal in this novel. She describes Sharanpur with its cultural value structure in the forties:
The “Englishness” had been a matter for pride and prestige. It had meant so much in the old days. It might have been appropriate in Bombay or Calcutta, where city life had drawn English and Indian together in a serious mixture of modernity but here in the U.P., the heart of India where men still greet one another with “Ram Ram”, where the carved images of many armed gods and goddesses reign over the countryside on festival days where Divali is still a blaze on earthen lamps, the “Englishness” had only seemed fantastic.

(Happy 1-2)

Sahgal’s first novel describes the orthodox beliefs in many Hindu families. Even among the traditional men, there were “daring” men who didn’t stick on to the orthodox beliefs, which were superstitious. The narrator’s father was one such man:

My father was a daring man who had crossed the “black water” as the voyage to Europe was known among the orthodox and had refused to do penance for it on his return. My mother, though inwardly shocked by his refusal, had staunchly supported him against criticism, as she supported all his views and enterprises against the displeasure, I am sure, even of the gods . . . . Like any good Hindu wife, she believed that his concern was with God and hers with God in him. (Happy 5)

Unorthodox people like the narrator’s father paved the way for a change in the taboo-ridden Hindu society.
Marriage in Hindu culture is once for life, “. . . because marriage among us, is for life, and those who do not adjust to its ups and downs must forever remain unhappy” (Happy 6). Women characters like Prabha, Savithri, Lakshmí and Kusum all symbolize the traditional tranquillity of Indian culture. Maya whose minor role has a major import in the novel, leads an unhappy married life yet she remains married and concentrates her attention on social service work. Saghal’s first novel showcases women who are happy or unhappy within their marriage. There is no question of walking out of marriage as it would shatter the cultural value of the institution of family. Rashmi’s decision to get a divorce from her husband in This Time of Morning was a mortal blow to her mother Mira. Mira felt: “Women stayed married, had since time immemorial stayed married . . . to brutal insensitive husbands” (Morning 203). Similarly arranged marriage is practiced even in these modern days in India which continues to keep caste system and dowry practices alive. Gowri in Storm in Chandigarh feels “There’s only one safety in India for some time to come, and that is to marry in your own state into a background you thoroughly understand” (145). Divorce for women was considered a sin in Hindu culture and a divorced woman was stigmatized by the society. Women like Simrit in The Day in Shadow were considered lucky by the society and to leave back such a happy life was mere stupidity. “Didn’t Simrit know she was the luckiest woman in the world? She could have anything she liked, clothes, jewels, anything. Why was she not happy?” (Shadow 80). But Simrit’s desire was not for material things. “I want a world whose texture is kindly, she thought. Surely there is such a world” (Shadow 89). Sonali, the protagonist in Rich Like Us opposes the arranged marriage. “A marriage joined
from top to bottom by caste, community and background” (57) was not her cup of tea. To escape such a marriage she goes abroad, to pursue her higher studies and chooses to be a career woman.

Sahgal is well aware that the religio-cultural practices of different religions, instead of uniting Indians, give them a separate identity as minority. Sahgal does not fail to bring out the strain faced by the minority before and after Independence. In *The Day in Shadow*, Raj Greg’s father fought against the traditional practices and was sent out of his home, penniless for his conversion to Christianity. His father fought a brave battle against the society which branded him disloyal: “It had meant being tied to the religion and culture of the west, when freedom had been the country’s cry. Oddly the withdrawal of the British had changed all that. Christianity had become Indian, its schools and colleges and hospitals firmly part of the community” (*Shadow* 104). Though Christianity had become Indian after Independence, Raj Greg feels insecure. When Simit asks him why he talks about India as if he were a foreigner, Raj says, “That happens when you belong to a minority. You look at things from the outside. You don’t take them for granted, you keep sounding them out. You get more anxious about them” (*Shadow* 103).

The feeling of Usman Ali, the Vice Chancellor of Delhi University in *A Situation in New Delhi* is different from that of Raj Greg. When Usman Ali is attacked at the university by the students, his wife Nadira feels his life threatened because he is a Muslim. Nadira feels it was a terrible mistake to stay in India after partition and she asks him to move to her parents’ place in Lahore. Usman tells her proudly that he is an Indian though a Muslim. He says, “I stayed here because
this is where I was born and my forefathers before me and yours too. I have no intention of leaving my country at this time of my life” (*Situation* 92). Though a Muslim, Usman Ali does not feel insecure in his motherland and he is proud to be an Indian.

Sahgal, at the same time, is very well conscious of the religious barrier between lovers of different religions who plan to marry. Even among the elite society such marriages were rare. In *The Day in Shadow* Raj Greg and Shaila had been in love for four years, but Shaila didn’t have the guts to tell her parents that she wished to marry a Christian. She had disowned him utterly and disappeared from his life, making him feel the whole thing as an illusion. Raj’s feeling for her was deeper-based and slowly he channelized his energy in a constructive way, by deciding to stand for Parliament election. He became an M.P. and forgot Shaila. In the name of religion, Shaila had disowned him but Raj understood that Shaila had only violent physical passion for him and nothing deeper.

The greatest religio-cultural problem faced by women in the past was sati. Sahgal’s own great grandmother was a sati and a temple was built in Bambuli village on the coast of Ratnagiri. Sahgal is against the practice of building temples idolizing and giving religious sanctity to such a barbaric custom as sati. According to Sahgal, as pointed out in her essay “The Virtuous Woman”, “It was something distant, a terrifying thrilling spectacle connected with ‘virtue’ (female) and ‘honour’ (male). It was a blend of history – culture – religion wrapped in the sanctified, impenetrable dust that shrouds in an artificially preserved, rather than living heritage” (31). She subtly and effectively weaves into the narrative of *Rich Like Us* the gory theme of “sati”. Sonali the young I.A.S officer reads her
grandfather’s diary. Her grandfather had described the way his mother was forced to commit “sati” by his paternal uncle in return for a promise that her son would be educated abroad. His grandfather was so enraged by the brutal act that he wanted to kill his uncle. Sonali also reads two other reports, one describing a reluctant widow being dragged into the flames, the second describing a willing widow trying to commit sati yet suffering in the process.

The social custom of “sati” was a religious practice and hence even the British were hesitant to interfere in it, though laws were constituted against the barbaric act. In *Rich Like Us*, Sonali’s great grandfather’s conversation with his English friend Mr. Timmons goes thus:

> The Government has to be careful where religious sentiments are touched. Any foreign government would have to be in a populace of this size. Did the Moghuls interfere with *Sati*?

They were not on a civilizing mission as you say you are. Yet they did, even so, try to interfere and they didn’t have the advantage you do, of a public opinion ripe for reform. (152)

However there were many nationalist leaders in India who wanted to bring a change in women’s condition and abolish the cruel practice of sati.

Critics have pointed out that even though the reform of women’s position seems to be a major concern within nationalist and colonialist discourses, women themselves do not appear in these discussions about them; we learn little about how they felt or responded on the crucial issue of sati. Lata Mani suggests that the entire colonial debate on sati was concerned with re-defining
tradition and modernity that “what was at stake was not women but tradition” and that women “became sites on which various versions of scripture/ tradition/ law are elaborated and contested”. (Mani 115).

Sahgal in Rich Like Us makes use of some editorials and letters written to the editors of newspapers as a form of historical evidence to prove the steps taken by the colonial masters to abolish sati. One of them is an editorial of the Calcutta Gazette of the 7th December 1829 which expresses supreme pleasure and celebrates the Act of Abolition of the cruel rite of suttee passed by Lord William Cavendish Bentinck. 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” (Rich 150). But the act didn’t put an end to the practice completely. Many of the widows were not willing to be a sati victim but they were forced into the pyre by their inhuman relatives. Sahgal uses in her novel one such episode described in a letter to the editor of the Bombay Courier dated 29 September 1823:

The unfortunate Brahminee of her own accord had ascended the funeral pile of her husband’s bones . . . but finding the torture of the fire more than she could bear, by a violent struggle, she threw herself from the flames . . . some gentlemen who were present immediately plunged her into the river . . . saved from being much burnt . . . . When the inhuman relatives saw this they took her by the head and heels and threw her into the fire and held her there . . . took up large blocks of wood with which they struck her in
order to deprive her of her senses . . . . She again made her escape and without any help ran directly into the river . . . almost every inch of her body had been burnt off, her legs and thighs, her arms and back were completely raw; her breasts were dreadfully torn and the skin hanging from them in threads; the skin and nails of her fingers had peeled wholly off and were hanging to the backs of her hands . . . every medical assistance was immediately given . . . she lingered in the most excruciating pain for about twenty hours and then died. (Rich 155)

The episode of the sati victim proves a woman’s inability to stick on to the cruel cultural practice in the name of religion and traditions. In the same novel, Sahgal describes another Hindu window immolated, after the death of her husband Neerbhoy Singh. This twenty six years old widow was dissuaded by the magistrate, but the window was determined to burn herself and she assured the magistrate “that self-cremation was not at all terrible . . . and added that she knew perfectly well what would be her sufferings on the pile and in what manner she would be recompensed for them hereafter” (Rich 157).

Sahgal thus quotes real incidents to show how women were culturally conditioned to believe on the superstition of suffering and soul’s incarnation by such religious practices.

Sahgal sees sati as no different from dowry deaths perpetuated in modern India by men who are money-mongers. Similarly the brutal murder of Rose in Rich Like Us is a modern day Sati. Rose, the London born second wife of a rich businessman Ram, risks marrying Ram despite knowing that he is already
married, and comes to India with him. She saves Mona, Ram’s first wife from suicide and in spite of their initial antagonism, soon develops friendly terms with her. The crippled beggar is helped by her. Her outspokenness and cockney bluntness makes her unacceptable to her step-son Dev. Though Rose is a brave woman, her position after her husband’s illness becomes uncertain. This leads to her death, arranged as ‘suttee’ usually is, by her husband’s relatives and partially motivated by the same economic reason. In Sahgal’s own words, “Rose’s murder is almost a worse form of sati” (Varalakshmi 368).

Sahgal is sure women in modern India would feel relieved that they are now in a more civilized India. Sahgal is also sure that none in their right sense would be a sati “And if it is by free will, that will is the result of conditioning since the cradle, in a scenario where ‘male’ honour and female ‘virtue’ are a cult ferocious in its connotations and merciless in its demands” (“Virtuous Woman” 32). Sahgal also mentions fleetingly, the ill-treatment meted out to the childwidow in the name of religion. She refers to the shaven-headed child widows and their ‘karma’ to eat the leftover food from the saint’s kitchen in Rich Like Us.

The Indian society, especially the Hindu culture is man-made. Its traditional stories and epics have been written and interpreted by men alone. Ramayana and Mahabharata have perpetuated the stereotype role women are expected to play in the society. A woman becomes “great” and “good” only when she sacrifices her “self” identity for the sake of her husband and family. Sahgal questions the Hindu society for worshipping Rama as a perfect sample of manhood though he threw out his beloved wife Sita listening to the words of a stranger. Sahgal says in “Nothing to Lose but Our Chains”: 
As a Hindu and a woman, I am naturally interested in discovering sanctions for liberty and equality of women within Hinduism if I can. What makes a woman ‘great’ apparently, is some barbaric and wasteful sacrifice. Gandhari in the Mahabharata keeps her eyes bandaged all her life because her husband is blind. Anusuya in her Markandeya Purana is married to a leper . . . . She even carries him on her back when he orders her to take him to prostitute’s house . . . . If these are the devis we are reared on from childhood, can it be anything but a clever little plot to keep fools in slavery? (qtd. in Varalekshmi 369)

These are the values women are conditioned to learn from their cradle. The overpowering mix of history – culture – religion had taught them stories about female sacrifice but women have to re-examine these epics. They have to “unlearn” what they had learnt from their childhood. She questions the hypocrisies, double standards and oppression present in the implicit codes of tradition. In Rich Like Us, when Rose, the English wife questions Ram living with his first wife Mora and herself at the same time, Ram says “Hindu marriage is not a contract, it is a sacrament” (63). He so easily quotes from the Hindu epics or puranas informing Rose that polygamy was in the tradition: “Lord Krishna had three hundred . . . King Dasrath, Ram’s father, had four wives . . . Muslims can have only four, at a time. We are more adventurous even polyandrous” (Rich 63). Rose being a Christian couldn’t understand such a cultural practice. Sahgal feels, “whether fundamentalism flies the flag of Islam or Hinduism, Christianity or Sikhism, women are its first victims. Unfortunately the forces that act as chains
on women are those of religion and tradition” (“Mercy” 194). Women had faced a lot of problems under patriarchy. In “At the Mercy of Her Izzat” Sahgal writes:

Most of the communities in India are bound by fundamentalist attitudes, though we have not yet come under a fundamentalist regime. We have burned women as satis and we burn them for dowry. We kill them as infants and abort them as foetuses. We leave them undernourished, uneducated and unloved so that there is more food, money and succour for their brothers. (195)

Since the pre independent days, reforms were felt essential in the ritual-and-superstition ridden Hinduism by great leaders. Sahgal who grew up under the influence of Mahatma Gandhi and her uncle Jawaharlal Nehru, was against the religio-cultural practices that separated men as untouchables. The exploitation meted out to these poor people appears in her novels as in *A Situation in New Delhi*:

Rishad’s group worked with the casteless, the Untouchables. The newspapers called them ‘underprivileged’ ‘the weaker section’. To Rishad they were scarcely human. They were people who hadn’t known they were people until Rishad and his group under Naren’s direction had started teaching them they were, exclaiming they need not work as many hours as they did, that they were entitled to more pay, that if a marauding caste neighbour set fire to one of their huts or raped one of their women, they need not suffer it. The law provided redress. How difficult just to teach them they were human. (110)
The evils of caste system do not feature as a major theme in Sahgal’s novels, yet there are instances which deal elaborately with the poor and the untouchables. Kishori Lal in *Rich Like Us*, though a great scholar, had set up a shop of bathroom accessories. When his Brahmin professor friend asked him why he had started such a business, Kishori Lal told him he was fulfilling Gandhiji’s commandment “Carry your own excreta and and no nonsense about it . . . . The Mahatma had made them carry their own shit . . . and those who had carried other people’s stink for generations and been pariahs got new names and became God’s children” (*Rich* 218). Kishori Lal was a true Gandhian. Sahgal also mentions about the ‘chi-chi-chi’ women who had to wash the menstrual rags of the upper caste women. Such practices clearly hint that Hinduism needed antidotes to clear away many unhealthy practices.

In addition, Sahgal also tells about the rape and killing of lower caste/class women. Sahgal in *Rich Like Us* mentions the names of several cities and towns where women are fed to brick kilns after they have been abused – “Muzaffarpur, Samastipur, Bhojpur, Beguserai, Monghyr, Purneo, Gaya, Patna, Chapra . . .” (81). As they belonged to the lower caste, they were afraid even to complain to the police for they would receive no justice.

Sahgal belonging to the Kashmiri Brahmin Caste doesn’t hesitate to criticize the pride and superiority complex these people feel in her novels. In *A Situation in New Delhi*, Usman, a Muslim friend of Devi, tells Michael about the curses in Hinduism, especially the caste system. Usman says that Devi, though being an Education Minister and a modern woman couldn’t come out of the caste barrier. He says “Deep down, this poor, misguided woman believes – oh
undoubtedly she believes – her blood is purer than someone else’s because of the accident of her caste” (Situation 88 the quotation bears repetition). In Rich Like Us too the find references to the Kashmiri Brahmin caste.

It must have been high caste – all Kashmiri Hindus are Brahmins – and their usefulness . . . gave one of the world’s oldest aristocracies its air of regal condescension toward the inhabitants of the Indian plains. And then Kashmiris had ruled India since independence, so they, I mean we were entitled to feel smug and special. (Rich 56 the quotation bears repetition)

Sahgal is honest in admitting the privileged position of the Brahmins, but at the same time she represents caste identities as a wrong basis to judge suitability for leadership. Awareness concerning India’s problem is the necessary qualification to be a good leader of the nation but after independence, when everyone started earning money, the brahmin’s privileged and special position is endangered. According to Sonali’s mother in Rich Like Us, “the little nobodies” were making more money than the privileged.

The dry-cleaner she dealt with, a funny little dark follow, had made enough to have a vulgar Punjabi sort of reception for his daughter’s wedding and the poor girl so dark too, no amount of money could alter that and with untouchables behaving like everyone else, getting into airline jobs and other branches of government service and all over the place on quotas, really the craze for equality had gone quite far enough. (Rich 188)
Equality was something which the upper castes couldn’t tolerate easily as it challenged the religio-cultural practice which kept them at the centre and the “other” (lower castes) in the fringes of the society.

Sahgal, though she belongs to the upper caste, feels civilized behaviour is essential in all human dealings. Sahgal’s own idea is expressed through the character Ram Krishnan in *The Day in Shadow*. To realise God, one must live to the fullest and highest of one’s ability. The ideal of service is incorporated in religion. The humanistic belief does not decry or bypass religion, it only rejects the age-old dogmas which are no more useful in modern India. The humanistic value projected in her work stands for secular religion, closely related to the purity and honesty in human relationship. Sahgal feels it is everybody’s right to have freedom and equal rights. All religions should thrive in this land. According to Sahgal, “As far as religion goes, different faiths should be allowed to co-exist and we should show respect towards other people’s religious beliefs. Religion, however cannot be allowed to rule over our lives and I would not tolerate religion taking over the power of the state” (qtd. in Sinha 113).

Sahgal who grew up in Gandhi’s India is for the communal harmony between Hindus and Muslims in India. All the efforts taken by Gandhi to bring unity between the Hindus and Muslims ended up in vain. During the partition, the Hindu and Muslim civil populations killed each other on the streets of the main Indian cities in such numbers that one can call it an “ unofficial” civil war. Sahgal addresses these painful memories in her novels and she clearly states her disagreement with partition. She sees it as an unnecessary trauma, affecting the lives of thousands of people who were displaced, leaving behind the gains and
projects of a lifetime. It had cost a lot to the common man, leaving a scar that wouldn’t heal easily. The reminder of such raw painful memories of partition could never bring the Muslims and Hindus together, but Sahgal wishes to erase such a communal rivalry between the Hindus and Muslims, and so she inserts in her text, scenes of friendship and unity between the two communities. In *A Situation in New Delhi* Sahgal mentions the Vice-Chancellor of Delhi University Usman’s close friendship with Shivraj, the Prime Minister of the nation. Usman doesn’t accept any favours from Shivraj. His wife Nadira taunts him about the “fatal charm of Shivraj” in his life and asks what benefit he had reaped from Shivraj, the Prime Minister. But Usman had never made his friendship with Shivraj a stepping ladder to fame and fortune. Even when Shivraj offered him high posts, Usman had honestly refused to accept them saying, “There should be one man of your acquaintance who does not profit in the remotest way by knowing you” (*Situation* 93).

Similarly in *Rich Like Us*, Sahgal tries to overcome India’s internal fragmentation across a diversity of communities. This point is made clear in a small episode where the co-existence of Muslim and Hindu identities is represented through the friendship between two men Ram and Zafar. Ram’s British wife Rose,

\[\ldots\] didn’t understand all the uproar about religion these days and the shouts in the streets of “Hindu – Muslim ho” telling the communities to be one when they were one already \[\ldots\]. What could possible pry them apart? They could be blood brothers, she thought, tall and aquiline, unhurried, unhurriable, handsome,
conceited, lovable and insufferable in all the same ways . . . . If Ram was a Muslimised Hindu, Zafar was a Hinduized Muslim. So what was all the shouting about?” (Rich 77)

Together with Ram and Zafar’s friendship, an important detail to assert the possibility of unity, already at the stage of the struggle for independence was the routine at Lalaji’s prayer meetings to support Indian independence: he read pieces from the Gita, the Koran and the Bible. By mentioning this wise and eclectic attitude of Gandhiji, Sahgal reveals her respect for cultural and religious diversity and a better way of sharing the Indian subcontinent – among different communities.

The novels of Nayantara Sahgal clearly reveal her pre-occupation with Hinduism. At the same time, her cross-cultural vision gives her an outlook to appreciate other religions too. Sahgal’s characters are faced with the conflict arising out of traditional religious belief and modern scientific education. Sahgal herself is ambivalent in her attitude towards Hinduism. She is averse to the idea of “Fate” as accepted by the average Hindu, because this in her view gives rise to apathy, inaction and complacency. A crying need to re-examine the traditional tenets of Hinduism is given by Sahgal through the critical outsiders to Hinduism like McIvor (Happy) Raj (Shadow) and Usman (Situation) and through the unconventional intelligent insiders like Sanad (Happy), Rakesh, Kailas and Kalyan (Morning), Vishal, Trivedi and Mara (Storm), Simrit and Ram Krishnan (Shadow), and Sonali (Rich) who unhesitantly pinpoint the drawbacks of the religion.
Sahgal doesn’t approve of simply making a virtue of renunciation as Hinduism does. But it could be accepted at a certain age in a man’s life. In her first novel *A Time to be Happy*, McIvor an English man says “the Hindus – seem very preoccupied with giving up things” (*Happy* 160) for which the narrator gives a convincing answer:

We are and we aren’t, I pointed out. That is one of the paradoxes you will find in India, probably the basic paradox. And when you examine it, it isn’t really a paradox at all. I have always believed there are two opposite tendencies that create the pattern of Indian life: a forth right sensuality existing side by side with a stark and stoic renunciation. They seem poles apart, but they are really two sides of the same coin. At heart the sensualist is as Indian as the ascetic. The difference between the two is usually a matter of time. It is ingrained in us from an early age that there is a time for everything and everything is right in its own time. (*Happy* 160)

The narrator further explains the “majestic acceptance of destiny” which, in the old age helps the Hindus to renounce the world and “There is so much talk and pandemonium around us all our days that, unless we retreated from if for a little while at least in our old age, we would severely die lunatics” (*Happy* 162). At the same time, Sahgal also gives the “other’s” view of renunciation. Suren in *The Day in Shadow*, a Christian convert feels that renunciation is “what defeats this country. It makes a man draw back and do nothing in a situation when he should take more responsibility, face up things and stand firm” (171). Yet through the words of the narrator Sahgal is able to justify Hinduism making a virtue of
emancipation. Moreover, Sahgal feels that religion is inseparable from a Hindu’s life.

Religion, for us, is inseparable from our daily life. A Hindu has no church as such – the temple is not to him what your church is to you, or the Mosque to a Muslim. It is a place where he may go if he wants to worship there, but he can live without setting foot there and still remain a perfectly good, practising Hindu. For many a Hindu, prayer is no more than the fervent repetition of God’s name ‘Ram, Ram, Ram . . .’. (Happy 162-63)

The same idea is expressed by Saroj in Storm in Chandigarh. When Vishal says that it must have been years since he went to a temple, Saroj answers that she too had not gone to temple for a long time. “But we are the most religious of all people” said Saroj (Storm 78). Sahgal feels that going to temple alone doesn’t make one religious, for being a Hindu is to understand what “the oldest religion on earth” tries to convey. It is apt to quote M.K. Bhatnagar’s remark in Modern Indian English Novel about Hinduism:

Hinduism defies definition. The word ‘Hindu’ doesn’t appear in any of the original scriptures of the Hindus. Whereas in Christianity and Islam, truths are believed to have been revealed in a defined form by God to a particular person at a particular time and place, in Hinduism religious truths were realized and expressed through a gradual process of reflection by many individuals spanning over centuries. (Bhatnagar 71)
Saghal feels that this quality of Hinduism that defies definition has given rise to a lot of confusion in the youngster’s mind. In *This Time of Morning*, Rakesh is puzzled over his chaotic heritage. He questions Kailas:

Why could Hinduism not be easily defined? The Christian scriptures he studied at school had clear, compelling commandments: Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart and all thy soul and all thy might. It was a strong, serene, unambiguous religion. It had a holy book and a church, a heaven and a hell. So did Islam and Islam, besides, overflowed the boundaries of religion to become a part of the daily life of Uttar Pradesh, woven into its very earth and air. Music, poetry and art, even the simple acts of speaking and eating would forever bear the stamp of Islam. Then why was Hinduism, the centre of consciousness, the creed he had been born into, the only baffling uncertainty? Why were there no commandments, no single scripture, no church to contain it? What were its beginnings or did it have any, ancient as it was, beyond time, older than rocks?

(*Morning* 52-53)

Kailas tries to explain the complicated religion which insisted on charity and conquering the senses but how far his defence satisfies Rakesh’s quest to know is not clear:

Hinduism was boundless enough, Kailas explained, to encompass the loftiest of metaphysics, rigid enough to despise the untouchable. It was goodness and piety and the living light of
faith, and Prayag... was probably the only place in the world where kings had given all their riches in charity. Yet it was the sufferance of disease and clamour near the temple. It was a torpor that accepted maimed limbs, blind eyes and abject poverty as destiny, letting generations live and die in hopelessness, and at the same time it was the majesty of the mind engaged in lifelong combat with the senses. You could not accept Hinduism in its entirety without harbouring ignorance and superstition too. You could not wholly reject it without destroying part of yourself, for it was the story of India. (*Morning 53*)

Sahgal feels that knowledge about Shastras, religion and Hindu epics is not found among Hindus. But faith is ingrained within them. Jit in *Storm in Chandigarh* says to his wife, “We can’t escape what we are Mara, all that’s gone into making of us. It comes out in so many ways, even the most westernized of us, in our thinking and our attitudes” (*Storm 94*). Sahgal accepts the impact of the ancient religion in one’s life, yet it should change according to the modern time or it may decay. Vishal in *Storm in Chandigarh* expresses this idea. Vishal says that many of the problems faced by Hindus revealed that they resisted change. They “seem to have slipped into a kind of decay. One big upheaval might have had some meaning. But this noiseless chaos, like the ground dissolving as you walk on it, is uncanny. The funeral march of Hinduism” (*Storm 76*). Moreover to survive the modern times Hinduism should have the courage to change, and throw away unnecessary rituals. Sahgal’s own idea regarding Hinduism is obvious in Vishal’s words:
To hold up what we call sacred to the light and examine it and to throw it away if necessary. . . . cultures met and blended and gained or lost something in the process, emerging a little different all the time. But it hadn’t happened here. A monolithic slab of antiquity had survived the ages. A way of life, wrongly called a religion, lay embedded in it. (Storm 76-77).

Similarly Raj, a Christian is able to understand Simrit’s inability to decide and act at a crucial time in her life “It made Raj wonder whether a Hindu ever tackled a problem as an individual. Did Hindus have any feelings that were personal and private like the family, caste and the beaten track of these past 2,000 years and more?” (Shadow 103). Usman, the Vice-Chancellor of Delhi University, a Muslim, criticizes the Hindus for “nothing new had entered their mental orbit for hundreds of years” (Situation 88). Sahgal gives a warning to the people of her own creed. Hinduism should adapt itself to the changing times “If the inert mass of them did not wake up to the fact that they were their own masters, the brutal and single-minded among them would” (Shadow 43). Sahgal feels that the central philosophy of Karma can be seen as encouraging passivity, at the same time, it can be taken as a challenge to shape a better future. According to the narrator in A Time to be Happy:

Karma merely means living your life and doing your duty to the best of your ability in whichever capacity you happen to have been born in. True, your present condition is the result of your past life and actions, but then it is equally true that what you do in this life will create the conditions for your next one. In other words, it rests
wholly with you to better your status. There was never a more challenging philosophy. (161)

Sahgal’s cross-cultural vision enables her to envision a remedy for the ills of the society. In *A Situation in New Delhi*, Usman feels “a Hindu remedy” was needed to solve the issues around him but in *The Day in Shadow*, Ram Krishnan says “no single belief has the answer” (196) to solve any problem in India. Indians faced their life problems differently according to their religious and cultural background. To the Christians,

God is found in order, in reason, and in much of nature. The religious man wishes to increase the amount of good in the universe. Aspiration is a fundamental part of his philosophy. He is forward-looking, progressive. He has a desire for improvement, for reform, and great faith in human will and effort. He does not compromise with evil. He cannot consider it part of the good. His God may not be all-powerful, but he is all-good. (*Shadow* 200)

But in the case of a Hindu, his whole attitude and approach is different.

He accepts evil along with good. Evil is not his own personal pain or sorrow but the working out of a larger plan of which he is only a small and insignificant part . . . . This is not cowardly resignation. It is adaptation. No soaring aspiration, but in its place an overwhelming sense of the insignificance of the individual as compared with the universe. His attitude can be summed up: However much I suffer, my suffering is as nothing in the eyes of God. (*Shadow* 200-01)
According to Ram Krishnan, if these two streams did not unite, then their importance in the history would vanish soon. He feels:

The meaning of any religion was devotion to good . . . . That awareness of good, of God, of the universe, whatever one called it, was pervasive and supreme. It descended to the dust of the village. It was everywhere. It had to be made to yield results, to become a song on one’s lips, a great fighting strength – and it was not today.

(Shadow 201)

Jasbir Jain avers that “the concept of religion which is projected in her works is, if one may use the term, secular religion, for it chooses for its base values important to men as human beings and is intimately related to morality, to purity of means and the need for honest relationships” (158).

Sahgal’s own words in Prison and Chocolate Cake echo the same idea: “The mountain top is the ultimate goal but in order to reach it one must journey over the perilous mountain road. We must be fit for the company of men before we seek the company of God” (171).

Sahgal feels that in the Indian society characterized by widespread ignorance and illiteracy with fatalistic and other-worldly attitudes, religion becomes a tool of exploitation. Rich Like Us talks about the self-appointed seers and saints who had not earned their halos but created their own halos to exploit the people. Sonali is compelled to visit a saint with her mother.

I stared at the blob who was my mother’s saint, who neither ate nor drank nor moved and hardly spoke, much less earned her keep. Her disciples fed morsels into the big bland frame, dressed and
undressed her, took her to the bathroom, stuffed or starved her as they pleased.  (Rich 57)

Sonali was not moved by her repeated visits to the saint, in fact she was disturbed to see the “shaven-headed little girls, wrapped in grimy saris, girls younger than me, waited for leftover food to be thrown to them from the saint’s kitchen . . . child widows. Their karma” (Rich 57). Sahgal is angry with such religious leaders who try to exploit the illiterates, deliberately confusing such issues with their karma. Child marriage and child widows have disappeared with legislation brought against it, yet Sahgal’s anger is directed towards the unscrupulous in whose hands Hinduism becomes a tool of exploitation. At the same time she is very well aware that “You could not accept Hinduism in its entirety without harbouring ignorance and superstition too” (Morning 53).

With all her criticism of Hinduism, Sahgal is, in no way, irreligious or vituperative in her treatment of religion. If Hinduism is interpreted positively and purposively, it can show the way. Many characters in Sahgal refuse to be cowed down by a blind adherence to the ritualized faith. They interpret it in an enlightened way and involve themselves body and soul in the immediate lines of the masses. Sohan Bhai and the narrator in A Time to be Happy threw themselves into the service of people believing in the Gandhian message of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam, the universal household of God. In Kailas too we find a constructive interpretation of Hinduism which makes him a political activist, committed to eradicate corruption. India’s composite culture and religious tolerance is explained in his words,
India was more than the Hindu saga, said Kailas. It was the great mosaic of peoples and tongues, faiths and philosophies, the sanctuary no seeker had ever been denied. It had been the home of Christian and Jew since the first century, Muslim since the eighth. India did not simply tolerate religion. It nourished the very spirit of religion and in this it was unique. For us, said Kailas, it was unique, too, because it was the place of our ancestral beginnings, treasure house of our achievements, land of our love and hope.

(Morning 53)

Gandhiji had nurtured this diversity and had worked for communal harmony. Honesty, truth, non-violence and service to humanity had made him a saint in politics. Transparency in politics, any action done in the bright sunlight was Gandhi’s policy. “Every act proudly performed in the sunlight” (Storm 217). But many of his beliefs had been out of tune with the twentieth century.

Sahgal feels that Indians continue to keep the frame work of democracy inherited from the British but have forgotten the humanity learnt from Gandhiji. Many of the communal, cultural, political and social problems India faces today is due to its people deviating from Gandhian ways. Gandhi felt the western impact would make people more materialistic and less spiritual. People had given up the simple living propagated by Gandhi and were adopting a luxurious life style. To fulfil the luxuries of the family, man has to earn a lot, so corruption finds an easy acceptance among people especially politicians. The whole governmental framework is corrupted. “There’s money changing hands all down the line. Your peon makes his from the men waiting to see you. The upper crust
responds to a different kind of bait” (Storm 58). Dhiraj, the Additional Secretary in External Affairs was a corrupt officer who had made money during partition buying the land of the refugees who left for Pakistan. He had bought it cheaply and sold it at a profit. Not only politicians, and government officials, even business men like Som and Dev considered money as the first priority, that human relationship begins to disintegrate. When Som in The Day in Shadow began to earn a profit by “the new deal to make armaments” (Shadow 84), Simrit his wife decides to leave him. Similarly Dev in Rich Like Us murders his step mother Rose, to climb up the ladder and become a cabinet minister. Desire for wealth, money makes man corrupt and evil.

Nayantara Sahgal is a self-proclaimed votary of Gandhism. She validates Gandhian strategies for emancipation and growth of people in all realms – social, economic, religious and political. She was inspired by the Gandhian policy of truth and non-violence. In her fictional work, she can be seen as a staunch crusader for the cause of values cherished by Gandhi, based on the religio-cultural diversity of the Indian soil. Sahgal says, “Religion to me had always been inseparable from the idea of service, for this is what Gandhiji had taught us by his example” (Prison 170). Gandhiji believed service to God was service to humanity. He propagated selfless service and identified himself with the poor. When Sohan Bhai in A Time to be Happy who lost entire family and possession in the Bihar earthquake of 1934, met Gandhiji to get solace from him, Gandhiji advised him to serve the people in the streets. Gandhiji told Sohan Bhai, “You are unencumbered by possessions and you can make common cause with those who,
like you and me, have nothing. You will never be alone. We are a vast brotherhood” (Happy 86).

Just as Sohan Bhai in *A Time to be Happy*, we have Kailas in *This Time of Morning*, who had

. . . succumbed to the magic of Gandhi. The fire, the dedication and single mindedness of the man in the loin cloth had attracted him, made him a member of the Congress, sent him to jail along with thousands of his countrymen, and trained and tempered something within him that might otherwise have developed haphazard and purposeless. What he had lost of his law practice he had gained in manhood. A singularly fortunate generation, Kailas felt, for whom ideals and actions had been happily wedded and the goal achieved. (*Morning* 14)

Vishal Dubey, an I.A.S. officer in *Storm in Chandigarh* is commissioned by the Home Minister, a Gandhian, to tackle a problem that had risen between Haryana and Punjab. The Home Minister had chosen Dubey because he had the capacity to counsel patience. Vishal, himself an honest officer, respected and followed the Gandhian Home Minister. He feels sad at his death, as seen in the following words:

. . . for this was more than a state funeral. It would mark the end of an era known as Gandhian. In politics that had meant freedom from fear, the head held high, . . . Gandhian politics had also meant open decision, the open action. No stealth, no furtiveness
and therefore no shame. Every act proudly performed in the sunlight. (Storm 217)

Gandhiji had expected the same values he preached and followed in his life, openness and transparency to be followed in politics. His main interest was to do good to humanity especially the poor. Simrit in The Day in Shadow regrets the new radicals’ deviation from Gandhian path and Raj Greg, the young independent Member of Parliament is doubtful about the soundness of democracy in the hands of new leaders. “Gandhi who, paradoxically, had had no quarrel with money or the rich, who had believed that the love and service of the lowly had very little to do with blood or the barricades or slogans renting the sky for earth-shaking causes” (Shadow 10). Sahgal regrets that Gandhian ideology is being sacrificed to the convenience of a few people in power and the present politicians, the wrong kind of people like Sumer Singh in power feel it is “time to throw away sentiment, the weak, worn-out liberalism of the past, time to bury Gandhi and write a new page of Indian history” (Shadow 186). The new radicals were using Gandhi’s image to capture and hold the masses. Raj feels that these new politicians would exploit Gandhi’s name. “They’ll dispense with him when they're good and ready but meanwhile they’ll keep resurrecting him cold-bloodedly – unwinding the mummy – whenever they need him. A more cynical bunch of manipulators would be hard to find” (Shadow 10, 11).

Sahgal admires the Gandhian ideology which does not flout tradition or religion. In fact it is more inclined towards the multi-cultural facet and piety of our nation. “Intolerance was never part of their tradition” (Situation 121) says a foreigner Michael, “It’s a colossal storehouse, some of it as fine as the world has
produced and very relevant to modern times, bombs and all . . . . They’ve got five thousand years of tradition to dip into. And nowhere does it come up with intolerance” (Situation 122). Sahgal rightly points out that the religious faith and tolerance that Gandhiji propagated was meant to raise the quality of life and not the standard of living, life style or the western luxuries adopted by the Indians. He emphasised self-employment and self-reliance, ie, earning one’s earning with self- respect and dignity. Consequently, Sahgal too gets genuinely interested in human beings and human values and shares Gandhi’s belief that all types of progress and reform should aim at the good of an individual, an important member of the nation to whichever creed he belongs. Sahgal remarks in From Fear Set Free:

Men had been responsible for revolutions before but Gandhi’s had been a revolution of values, concentrating on change not through the capture of power or even through legislation but through the human heart . . . . All through the difficult and often discouraging years of the non- violence struggle for freedom this striving had been an enriching venture, uniting men and women of different religions and walks of life . . . the wealthy and the influential with the poor and unknown . . . creating a brotherhood whose shared trials forget sturdy hands. (2)

Sahgal feels that Gandhi’s ideology was based on the religio-cultural background of India, easily accepted by the people. Gandhiji respected other religions, but Gandhian secularism does not mean removal of religion from public sphere, whereas this separation was seen essential by Nehru for the
working of a modern democratic nation-state. But Nehruvian secularism’s elitist nature made it fail to gain widespread political currency among the masses; it was seen as a western-imported ideology, whereas Gandhiji who was more concerned with the people than the struggle, became an undisputed leader of India. Sahgal says:

Gandhi was their leader precisely because he was rooted in the same soil, nourished on the same simple diet, reared in the same belief and virtuous by the same standard. He did not impose alien standards on India. Much of what he taught and practised – his belief, above all, that self-divide is the path of discipline and a higher normal calibre – found an answering echo in millions of Indians. (Fear 73)

Sahgal realises that the present politicians are far removed from their countrymen. In A Situation in New Delhi, Sahgal portrays her uncle Nehru as the character of the Prime Minister Shivraj. Shivraj’s death seems to have drawn a curtain on whatever Gandhiji stood for. His widowed sister Devi, a believer in Gandhian ideals, feels isolated amidst this new breed of politicians. Because of the collapse of the value system preached by Gandhiji, politicians become corrupt, talented youngsters like Rishad and Naren consider violence as the route for social change. They wish to build a new India for the underdogs of society by joining in the Naxalite Movement. Their mission too fails as they are victimized by the same violence. Rishad knew that his mother and other freedom fighters had fought for freedom. He “thought that others in their time had fought against wrong, but if that had been the right kind of struggle, he said, why were there still
so many wrongs?” (Situation 142). The answer to this question lies in the words of Ram Krishnan:

To fight wrong, . . . a man has to believe it is terribly important to fight it . . . we need to resist what we don’t believe in and give us the will to act. We had it under Gandhi. He took ‘ahimsa’ – non-violence – Hinduism’s oldest ideas and sent a whole nation into battle with nothing but that. Who would have thought it possible? You in your generation may have to find a different spring board, but there is no scarcity of ideas among us. (Shadow 234)

Sahgal gives a message to the younger generation to fight a tough battle against the politicians who were disintegrating the nation under several social, religious and cultural issues. However Sahgal regrets the stark reality that in India people have yet to learn to shed fear. The spirit of dedication and fearlessness was replaced by hypocrisy, sham, cowardice, and corruption and under Indira Gandhi’s autocratic regime of emergency, men became cowards; Sonali in Rich Like Us explains why people in India accepted such a repressive regime. “We are blind from birth, born of parents blind from birth. We do not see what we do not want to and when we cannot avoid a nasty sight it still can’t do much to hurt us” (24). Sonali believes that it was her Hindu upbringing which had given her this insularity.

In all her novels, Sahgal reveals her protagonists fighting valiantly against repressive political forces, inspired by their action-oriented creed. Sonali in Rich Like Us is one such fighter with more self-awareness and self-assurance than the earlier heroines of Sahgal like Rashmi, Saroj and Simrit. Sonali has a system of
ideals which are severely shaken by the events of 1976. Sonali growing under the impact of her Gandhian father, felt Gandhiji “had taken human rights a hundred years ahead in two decades without a glimmer of class war” (Rich 125).

Sonali becomes an I.A.S. officer and chooses to live a life of a successful career woman. Her strong sense of service receives a blow when she is demoted from her responsible position in civil service because she refuses to sanction approval to begin a foreign soft drink called “Happyola”. Sonali didn’t know that the proposal had the blessing of her superiors. Sonali is stunned by what is happening around her and fails to react immediately. She falls sick and it is during this period of rest, she begins her self-questioning. She thinks of her father; he would have told her to resign; it would have been a kind of protest, a satyagraha. Her father himself had died rather than making a “compromise with dictatorship”. Sonali feels that her father would have said, “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” (Rich 198). Sonali too resigns her job, giving up the profession of her dreams, to maintain her self-respect. Sonali proves herself a Gandhian. Till the end, Sonali, is portrayed as a courageous woman, trying to protect Rose by giving some legal support.

Nayantara Sahgal’s cross-cultural vision is obvious in her depiction of Sonali, a western educated Indian Civil Service Officer and Rose, the British wife of Ram, an Indian businessman. Sonali’s stay in America and her education had westernized her and Rose’s life in India, as the second wife of Ram seems to have Indianised her. Unknowingly, Rose is Indianised even before her marriage to Ram. Rose refuses to have any sexual relationship with Ram before their
marriage, though it was not wrong in English culture. She didn’t care about the “compulsory virginity” but she wanted him to understand that she had her own mind and feelings.

In the case of Sonali, the love that blooms between her and Ravi Kachru in a foreign land, gives her a freedom to enjoy every moment of it with unlimited joy. Sonali had interesting discussions and happy times with Ravi, though they lacked “sexual sophistication”. Sonali didn’t hesitate to have sexual relationship with Ravi. “We knew we could kiss without bumping noses and that was about all. From there we invented the making of love for ourselves” (Rich 126). Sonali enjoyed individual freedom in America and was westernised in her attitude.

Sonali is an alter ego of Nayantara Sahgal as she represents the author’s quest for individual freedom and Gandhian panacea for all social ills in independent India. The place of religion and culture cannot be set aside. Sahgal wishes to follow the path of the great Indian leaders in the past, who had a dynamic view of religion. They used it in a positive and healthy way as a significant base for progress. They were religious “in spirit, if not in conventional observance” (Bhatnagar 171). Mahatma Gandhi had taken out non-violence from Hinduism and blown fresh breath into it, thus, using it as a weapon against the mightiest empire on earth. Usman in A Situation in New Delhi, faced with the crumbling edifice of democratic institutions all around, comes to realize that “a Hindu remedy” has to be found to the political ills based on the cultural pattern of India.

According to Sahgal, rediscovering a clear gospel of Hinduism would involve drawing on the best of other religions like Islam and Christianity, as no
single religion contains the remedy for the political ills. The dialogue between Ram Krishnan and Raj, coming from two different religious backgrounds Hinduism and Christianity respectively, conveys a message of give and take. According to Sahgal:

The new message is an amalgam of the timeless universality of Hinduism and concern for the temporal welfare in Christianity – both believing in God as the source of all value and as a symbol of all good. This synthesis can provide a formidable challenge “to combat the genius of Marx” (Shadow) . . . . So far as the immediate needs are concerned, non-violence in a reinvigorated form can give the lead. (Bhatnagar 172)

To Sahgal, religions need not be compartmentalised. The new amalgam she wishes for would dissolve all differences and narrow-mindedness. All writing is adventure to Sahgal, and living in India she is influenced by the social and political environment of India which includes caste, corruption, religious fundamentalism, along with computers, satellites and sexual revolution. Sahgal as a sensitive creative writer is able to feel and see what is happening around her, and put it into words.

As a self proclaimed cultural hybrid, Sahgal surely knows that it is impossible for her to cast out her religious legacy without rupturing her identity. When she described her condition are “schizoid” in a lecture, she may have been acknowledging just how painful and damaging it is to live with such a burden of internalized, irreconcilable contradictions. With this knowledge of diverse cultures around her she conveys a message of give and take.