

## Sufferings of Women in Nayantara Sahgal's *Rich Like Us*

**Manoj Kumar Garg**

Assistant Professor

Department of English

Acharya Narendra Dev College

University of Delhi

### Introduction

Suffering is the state of mental and emotional distress which arises when one experiences pain, however there is marked difference between the two: "Pain is physical, suffering is mental." (Wikipedia). Pain is related to the body whereas suffering is related to emotions. Pain results because of disturbed functioning of the body, while suffering is the product of negative emotions. "Suffering is proposed to be defined as an unpleasant or even anguishing experience, severely affecting a person at a psychophysical and existential level." (Conceptualizing). It starts when things go in wrong way or beyond expectations. "It may come in all degrees of intensity, from mild to intolerable." (Wikipedia).

Suffering is inevitable. Everybody encounters problems in life and undergoes suffering at one stage or the other, but women suffer the most. They suffer not only because of emotional distress, but also because of men's actions. Such is the case in Nayantara Sahgal's novel *Rich Like Us*. The novel presents the sufferings of women through the characters of Rose, Mona, Nishi, Dev and Ram. Sahgal renders a living picture of oppressed, depressed and suppressed life of women through these characters. She also presents the social evils that cause sufferings to women. The story is in third person narrative, narrated by the omniscient narrator, Sonali.

Rose, a British immigrant and second wife of a powerful native businessman Ram, is entangled in a three-pronged marriage. She struggles to find her place in male-dominated Indian society which is filled with exotic social standards, ancient customs

and social evils. Not only Rose, but Ram's first wife, Mona also suffers because of Ram's second marriage and his extra-marital affair with Marcella. Nishi, Dev's wife, is reduced to be a social butterfly, a puppet, dancing to the tune of her husband. All the characters are emotionally exploited at the name of tradition and rituals. They suffer not only because of their deeds, but also because of the misdeeds of their male counterparts. Rose and Ram meet in a chocolate shop in London. She gets attracted towards Ram and falls in love with him. She, against her mother's wish, decides to marry Ram, and breaks her engagement with Freddie. Her mother resents on her decision, but she defends the decision. She shows full faith in Ram. He was not a person, but a magnetic pull for her. She was unaware that she has entered into an emotional labyrinth.

She gets shocked when, one afternoon, Ram tells her that he has a wife and an infant child. She fails to believe the words. "Her brain grappled with this new turmoil, and a man who could talk about a courtship with her when he was already married and a father". (RLU, 42) She asks Ram how they can marry while he is already married. Ram replies that his religion permits a man to have more than one wife. This condescending attitude shows that a man can go upto any extent to fulfil his selfish motive.

Rose was so passionate in love that, in spite of knowing that Ram is married and father of a child, agrees to marry Ram. She marries Ram and sails for India with him, leaving her parents and country. She dreams of romantic life with Ram, but finds totally different reality. In Ram's house, she feels herself lost in the new world of constant change. She faces humiliation and hostility in the house. Ram's father denies to accept her. He says: "Take that woman out of my sight." (RLU, 45). She is looked upon as an 'intruder' or a 'usurper' by Mona. She hurts her (Rose) by frequently reminding that she (Mona) is the mistress of the house and has a stronger status for being mother of a son. She could not go back to her land because it was her decision to marry Ram. "Leaving her parents was the only deliberately cruel thing she had ever done."(RLU, 43).

She has no importance to anybody in the house. Many a times, she starts feeling herself guilty. "Why was I born? Why am I living? What do I get? What am I giving?" (RLU, 247). Sometimes, she foolishly consoles herself by thinking that everything will be alright after Mona's death; but, at the same time, she comes to the reality and recollects that Mona is just two years older than her and will not die for years. Sahgal probes the inner recess of Rose's psyche in order to discover the root of her passing resistance and silent suffering.

Marriage proves a cage that traps her to lead a life full of miseries and suffocation. She, like her room in the house, feels herself isolated and cornered. Freddie points her out: "Marriage has changed you. You have become 'more serious-like'." Sahgal expresses the disappointment and frustration of Rose who experiences social and cultural oppression in the male-dominated Indian society.

Rose fills with sense of insecurity when Ram, tossing and grumbling in his bed, often gets up and goes down to soothe wailing Mona, and remains with her for hours, even sometimes for whole night. She feels disgusted at that time, and sometimes reaches the pinnacle of being wronged. But, in spite of all this, she loves Ram dearly. She could think of returning back to England, but doesn't want to leave Ram. She tells Bugs that she cannot bear divorce at any cost, and never think of leaving Ram. She thinks that love is the adhesive that binds people and nurtures life. Love is complete emotional involvement for her. But, for Ram, love is merely a sport that provides sensual pleasure, and a woman is born to offer the same. He, in spite of having two wives, falls in love with another young, beautiful and highly cultured British girl, Marcella. He shamelessly rides and plays tennis with Marcella and her friends without thinking of Rose's emotions. Even he doesn't care to hide his love-affair from Rose to save her from being hurt. He considers it as his right to have extra-marital affair. He justifies the relationship by telling that it is all intellectual, but Rose does not accept his argument. He even wants Rose for Marcella's sake and gets separated from her. He says that it will

be a separation, not a divorce; and she'll have everything she would want. He lives with Marcella for five years and puts Rose aside. Later, when, the plan of living with Marcella doesn't materialize, he asks Rose to come home back without offering any explanation or apology for his conduct. He exploits Rose because she is emotionally attached to him.

Rose feels jealous of Marcella. When Ravi and Sonali ask Rose about Marcella, she replies that Marcella is an old flame of Ram, a steady flame that's blazing like a ruddy beacon these days. She also tells them about the dinner party in which the whole menu was changed because of Marcella. Sahgal, through this episode, tries to show how Rose's mind passes through unremitting pain.

Man takes it as his right to satisfy his desire at both emotional as well as physical levels outside the marriage, while it is ruthlessly condemned as adultery in case of a woman. At the slightest hint of deviation on her part, which may not even involve sex, man turns violent and hostile towards his wife and starts persecuting her. Ram, himself, has relationship with Marcella, but when Rose goes out with Freddie, he gets annoyed with her. He says: "You know I don't mind your going out with friends when I'm away, but making a spectacle of yourself till all hours in public places is another matter." (RLU, 136)

Sahgal highlights the double standards of society where men are allowed to take liberty in seeking sexual-pleasure, even after marriage, but wives must ever remain devoted to their husbands and please them. A woman should never think of other man whereas man is free to have affair with not only one, but also more than one woman.

Communication is the breath of married life. Ram shares nothing with Rose. She is left unaccompanied throughout the day and all through night. When Ram was ensnared by Marcella, there was no communication between them for a long time. At that time, Rose felt as she has been suffering for years. There was no one to hear her suffering. Sahgal presents the psychological problems faced by a woman through the character of Rose.

Ram is impervious to the pain of his wives. His first wife, Mona, gets upset when he brings Rose as his second wife. Now Rose suffers because Ram switches off to Marcella. Life for Rose and Mona is agony whereas it is a profitable arrangement for Ram. As his friend, Zafar, remarks: "You have the path to heaven all paved for you.... With a cocktail party upstairs and a prayer meeting downstairs." (RLU, 77).

Ram looks upon Rose as a means of sensual pleasure and self-gratification, while she loves him dearly. When Ram falls ill, she worries and cares for his illness. He suffers a stroke and falls into coma. Every evening, she sits by his bed, looking at him, whispering to herself- Ram Ram Ram, like a prayer. Now Ram realizes her importance, but it was too late. By this time, Ram himself had become the victim of circumstances. Sahgal exquisitely pin points the inner struggle and sufferings of Indian women through the characters of Rose and Mona. She views that a woman should not make continuous sacrifices in order to please men. Relations are based on mutual cooperation, and one partner should not keep on suffering to maintain the relationship. She admonishes that this is the high time for women to realize their rightful place in marriage and understand that both the partners stand on equal level in marriage. Both need to be true in relationship and respect each other.

Rose suffers not only at the hands of Ram, but also because of her stepson, Dev. When Ram no longer remains the master of the house, Dev treats her badly. He has no respect for Rose. He feels that she is an unwelcomed person in the house. He considers her as 'his father's keep'. Many times, she had heard him saying, "She was my father's keep, so why shouldn't I control her account?" or "She nearly killed my mother." Or "She lorded it over the house, bossed the show when it was my mother's house." (RLU, 275). When Ram suffers a stroke and falls into coma, he forges Ram's signature and withdraws money from the joint account of Ram and Rose. He schemes to take all Ram's assets by disposing of Rose.

One day, Rose's dead body was found in a well. Responsibility of her accidental death was laid on her drunkenness. The news was spread that she committed suicide. Nishi tells Sonali that Rose could not bear Ram's illness and killed herself. Ram's illness was the reason that she lost interest in life. Rose got into desperate state of mind for no improvement in Ram's health. Sonali doesn't believe that Rose can commit suicide. She believes that it is a planned murder. She has been killed and the killers would never be brought to justice. The beggar's eyewitness account confirms Sonali's suspicion. He makes it clear that he has seen a youth, suffocating Rose with a sack, descending over her head, another pinioning her arms. Both of them were carrying her out to the well where her body has been found.

Through the murder of Rose, Sahgal portrays the callousness of Male dominated Indian society. Rose is not the only one who is killed by her relatives; innumerable cases of bride burning have been reported every day even today.

Mona is the example of a typical Indian wife who dares not to raise her voice against any of the actions of husband. She never questions if something goes against her. She is an ideal of subdued womanhood. She is quite simple, orthodox, religious and devout lady. She is the symbol of a docile woman who remains suppressed till the end of her life. When Ram comes with Rose as his second wife, she does not utter a single word, but weeps in silence. She accepts whatever life has offered her. In spite of raising her voice, she keeps a fast and holds prayers to thank God for Ram's safe return. She also arranges a puja in the house for the same. On the other hand, Ram is a westernized husband who doesn't care for her feelings. He also arranges a cocktail party in the house which Mona bears with great difficulty. He marries Rose in spite of having Mona as his wife. She suffers badly at Ram's hands.

Both the wives, Rose and Mona, live on different floors in the same house. Mona lives on the ground floor with Ram's father and her son, Dev; and Rose lives on the first floor. However Ram had done injustice towards Mona, she keeps on praying and

fasting for his long life. She feels terribly helpless, lonely, anguished and oppressed whereas the real oppressor, Ram, goes scotfree. He enjoys life fully with both the wives, Mona looking after his house and his son, and Rose providing him sensual pleasure and company in business, while both the women feel lonely, insecure and wronged. Sahgal shows that bigamy is allowed for men in the society which entails sufferings and sacrifices to women.

Mona feels that Rose has taken Ram away from her, which results in a cold war between Mona and Rose. She was an outsider, an intruder, a usurper for Mona. When the conflict between both of them was very high, Marcella enters Ram's life. This occurrence brings transformation in their lives. Ram spends maximum time with Marcella, leaving Mona and Rose alone. He plays with their feelings and emotions. Mona finds herself lonely in the house. Even there was no communication between Ram and Rose for weeks.

Ram inflicts great emotional violence on both the women. He sees every relationship in terms of his advantage and gratification. In the beginning, Ram shows consideration to Mona, even he had married Rose, but soon starts ignoring her. His neglect hurts Mona badly. It was too much for her. Unable to bear the pain, one day, Mona tries to commit suicide. Rose saves her from burning. She drags the cover of Mona's bed and wraps it round her struggling body with Kumar's help. She takes her out of the room. Mona gets badly shocked, but refuses to go to hospital. It indicates that Mona had been living under a curse of time.

After this incident, Mona's attitude changes towards Rose. She appreciates and welcomes her by saying: "We are sisters." (RLU, 175). Both become good friends and understand the feelings of each other. Later on, Mona succumbs to cancer. Even in this critical stage, Ram pays no heed to Mona's sufferings. Rose was the only agent of solace to her. In the dying moments, she extracts a promise from Rose to treat Dev as her own son, and look after him and his newly married wife.

Sahgal analyses the situations and circumstances in which a woman is forced to live, grappled between the powerful currents of tradition and patriarchy. She is inescapably subjected to continuous physical and mental torture as well as sexual assaults. Her individuality, personality and identity are totally crushed. Her voice is hushed up and very instinct of self-assertion gets capitulated.

Sahgal also portrays the maddening pain that a woman bears when gives birth to child. She describes Nishi's rebellious feelings at the time of her child's birth. The account suggests both Nishi's mute suffering and her inability to protest because of the universal glorification of motherhood: "It was night and a scientific light fell mercilessly on her exposed and wounded flesh, her cry deranging no one but herself. Their announcement motherhood revived fresh raw protest... A stranger laid the child she hadn't wanted, and next year the second child she did not want, like trophies beside her." (RLU, 263-264)

Nishi, Dev's wife, suffers intensely. She obeys her husband as if he is her master. She asks no questions and doesn't look beyond the vaneer of Dev's contacts. She opts to live with the tragedy of her divided being.

Sahgal probes into the psyche of her female characters in order to reveal their frustrations and personal quandaries they encounter in modern life. She presents the problems faced by modern women in contemporary male-dominated Indian society, struggle to overcome these problems, search for identity as well as journey towards self-realization. She presents the sufferings of women with minute analysis and envisions the world that is based on gender equality. Women are the centrifugal force in all her novels and present a variegated picture of womanhood. The novels deal with human relationships and portray contemporary Indian society with all its vices and virtues. She relates the present with the past and describes how Indian women had to suffer at the name of customs and social practices even in the past. She uncovers the disgraceful Hindu social convention of 'sati', "a revolting system of suicide and murder." (RLU,

150). Claims were made that widows energetically experienced sati, but Sahgal denies this claim and portrays how they were forced to do so. The widows were given intoxicating drinks and sedatives, and dragged to the fire. Sonali describes how a widow couldn't bear the flames and tried to get out of the pyre. Her relatives beat her bitterly, with logs of wood, and thrust her back into the fire. Sonali's great grandmother was also murdered at the name of this evil practice. The relatives, who had pushed her into the pyre, build a shrine on the spot turning it into a pilgrimage centre. The document, found at the bottom of the trunk of Sonali's father, proves that it was a murder. Similar happens with Rose as she was killed by her relatives. Sahgal shows that this evil practice is still continue in the form of dowry deaths where brides are burnt. Sonali remembers the report when a bride was burnt to death by her in-laws because her parents could not satisfy their greedy demands for more dowry. Sahgal also gives a reference to the rape of five women in order to show the exploitation of women in male dominated Indian society. The armless beggar gives the witness account how eight policemen sexually humiliated the women from his village to punish the male farm labourers for their obstinacy in defying the land-owner.

### **Conclusion**

Indian women have been silent sufferers for years. They have not been treated as individuals. Sahgal, in *Rich Like Us*, has brought out the sufferings and agony of women which result out of uneven power-division in favour of men. She has depicted the hypocrisy, meanness and double-standards of men through the characters of Ram and Dev. She has also brought out the social evils rampant in Indian society as well as their disastrous consequences for women. The novel has portrayed the sufferings in a realistic manner.

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