

Indian Fiction in English
Dr. Merin Simi Raj
Department of Humanities and Social Sciences
Indian Institute of Technology – Madras

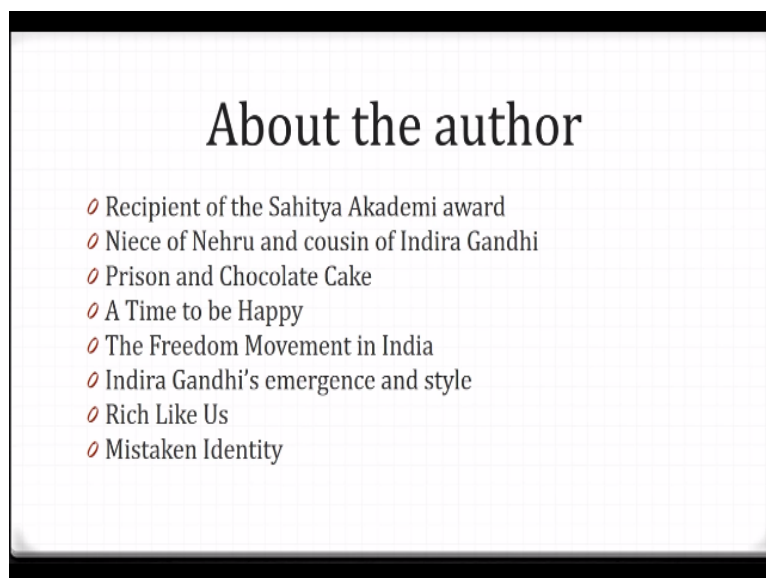
Lecture - 27
Rich Like Us

Good morning everyone. Good to see you all today. Today, we are discussing this novel Rich Like Us written by Nayantara Sahgal. This is not one of the novels prescribed for detailed study in this course; however, we shall be taking a very quick look at this to know what kind of woman writing was prevalent and more importantly Rich Like Us indicates what different kind of nation writing had been done by women writers who were writing as part of Indian writing in English.

And as we have suggested and indicated in the number of lectures earlier, most of the writings by women were about the domestic spaces, about the family spaces, they were writing mostly about relationships, about tradition, about bonding, about the crisis in relationships etc. Nayantara Sahgal in that context comes across a very different kind of writer who tries to engage with the nation in a slightly different form altogether.

She talks about an important segment in the nation's history now known as emergency. She engages with the post-emergency narratives in such a way that she also enters the kind of writers who had been talking about the nation in significant ways.

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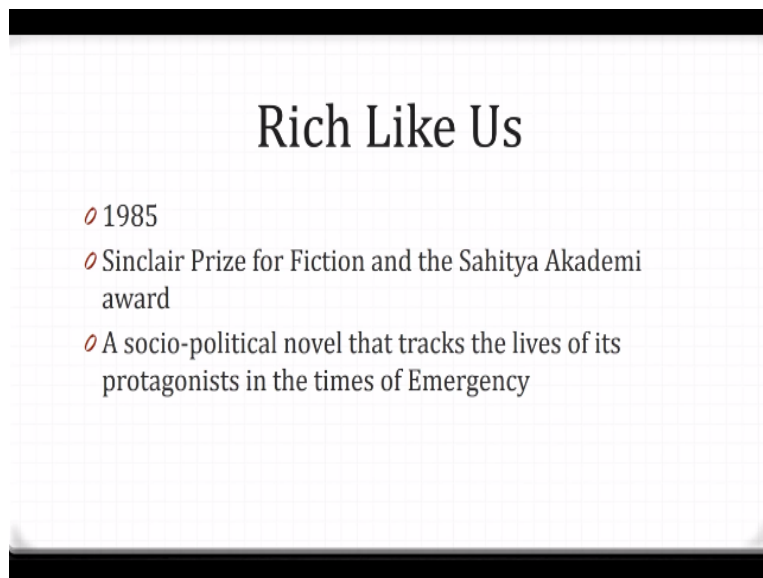


Before we begin discussing the novel per se, I would like to give you an overview about the author. Nayantara Sahgal is a recipient of the Sahitya Akademi award and that also makes her a part of the canonical writers. She was also the niece of Nehru and the cousin of Indira Gandhi, so this position of hers made her political articulations extremely interesting.

Because ever interested the readers were interested in knowing the kind of positions that the Sahgal would adopt while critiquing emergency and also while talking about the various narratives about the nation. She is also known for her other fictional works including her memoir. She has authored works such as Prison and Chocolate Cake, A Time to be Happy, The Freedom Movement in India, Indira Gandhi's emergence and style, the novel that we shall be discussing today Rich Like Us and Mistaken Identity one of her latter writings.

If you survey these titles, you will also get to know that there is a way in which she is very predominantly political. The title of her works also indicates the kind of political writings that she had been indulging in throughout her literary carrier.

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The novel that we shall be taking a look at today Rich Like Us, it was published in 1985, it had received immediate success and won the Sinclair Prize for Fiction and also the Sahitya Akademi award and if I try to sum this novel up in a single statement, I would like to say that this is a social political novel that tracks the lives of its protagonist in the times of emergency.

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Historical novel

- o Gandhi
- o Quit India movement
- o Formation of INA
- o Sati
- o Not an account of the political happenings - about the 'face in the crowd'
- o Historical events - just a background

At various levels, this has been seen as a historical novel. This certainly has references to Gandhi, the Quit India Movement, the formation of the Indian National Congress and of course at the end it is abolishment which was part of the nationalist narratives from the earlier times onwards, but however what makes *Rich Like Us* very distinctive from other kinds of historical novels is that this was not really a mere account of the political happenings.

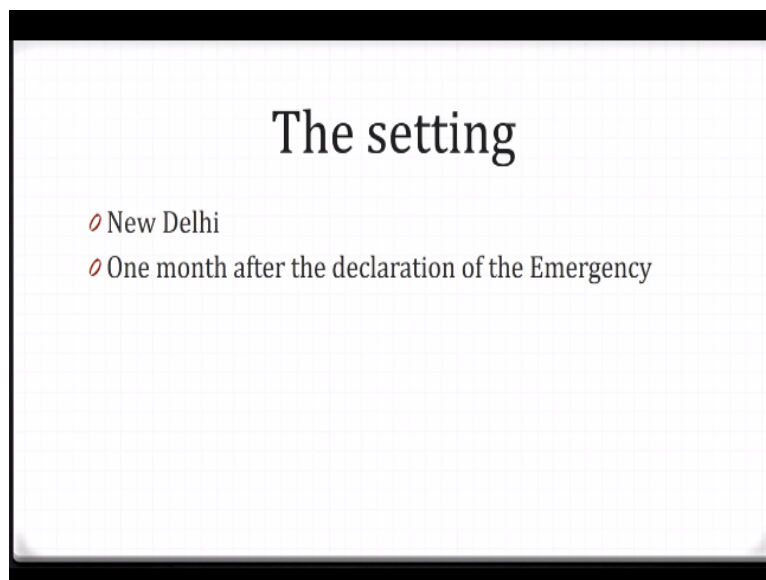
Sahgal does not give us a sense of blow-by-blow account of what had been happening during particular periods, during certain eras. On the contrary, this is more about the stories of the face in the crowd rather faces in the crowd and in that sense the historical events, the political events that Sahgal talks about, they mostly server as a backdrop or as a background to the many things that are being discussed as part of the novel.

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- o Feminine experience - both oriental and occidental
- o Like *Heat and Dust*

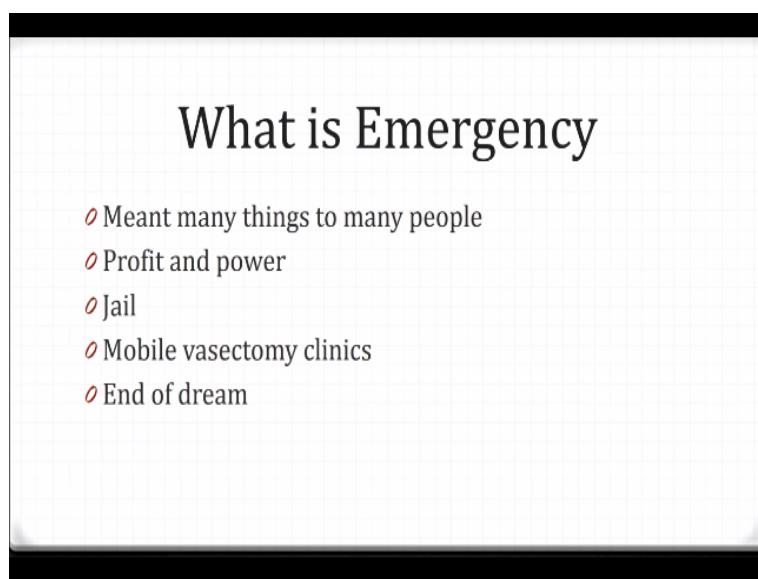
And this novel also has another rare distinction to its credit. It talks about the feminine experience both the oriental and the occidental. It gives voice to the native women's experience as well as the foreign British women's experience. So in that sense, the narrative voice the shifting of the thrones, it is a pretty much like Heat and Dust, a novel which we have already discussed.

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If one talks about the setting of this work, this is set in New Delhi and the story begins at a time, month after the declaration of the event of emergency. So this setting makes the characters and the many events in their life extremely important and we also evaluate and analyze the character and the events against this setting which is very predominantly political as one would already know.

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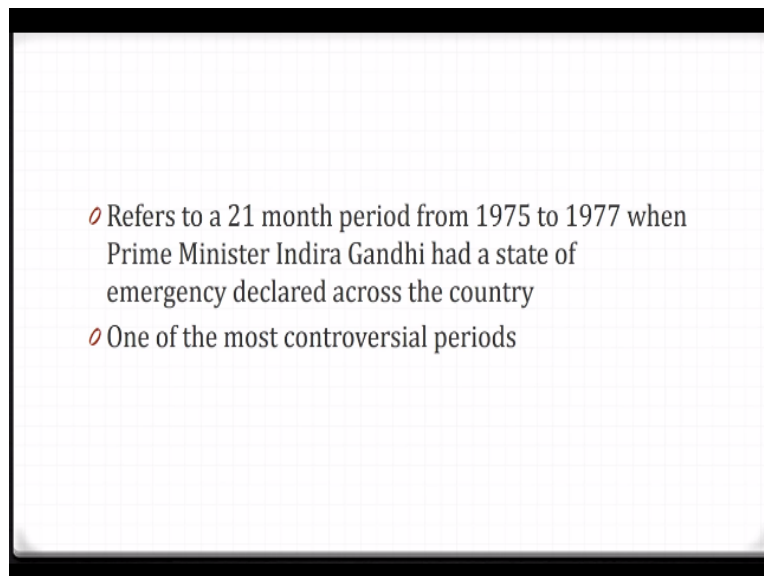


So what is Emergency? Before we talk about the novel, before we talk about how Sahgal narrates emergency, it is important to understand what emergency is and how this has been regarded in the national history. Emergency, it is possible to say that it meant many things to many people.

The novel also gives us a sense of this ambivalence which is part of this event. For some it meant profit and power, for some it meant imprisonment in jail and for some particularly disadvantage sections of the society, for them it was mostly symbolized by the mobile vasectomy clinics and for many middleclass young men and women, for many aspiring individuals who were also idealist, for them it also signifies the end of a dream.

So this novel tries to unpack the many ways in which emergency can be seen as an event which sort of a broke the narrative which in multiple ways broke the narrative of the modern nation especially in the post-independence period.

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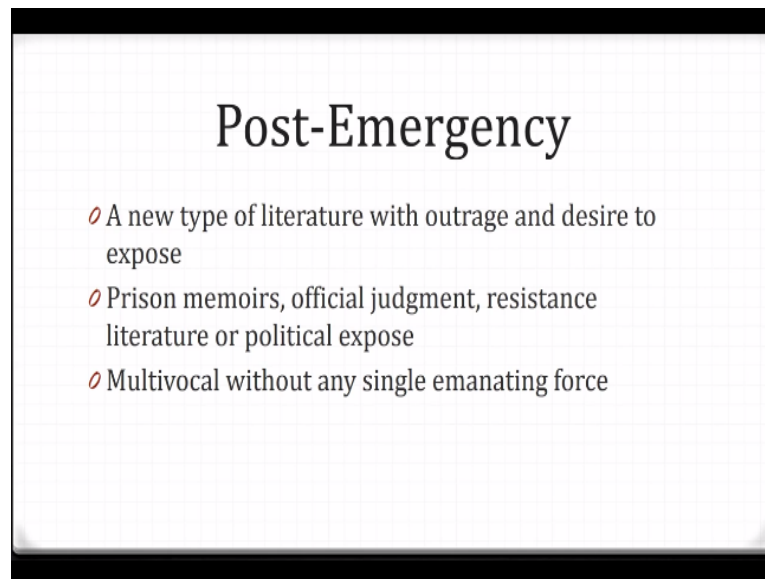


And if I try to give you a rather plain definition of what this political event emergency signified, it is possible to say that it refers to a 21-month period from 1975 to 1977 when Prime Minister Indira Gandhi had a state of emergency declared across the country and needless to say this is till date has been referred to as one of the most controversial periods in Indian history.

And more significantly there are very little ways in which one can remember this event unlike the event of independence which signifies more positive undertones. Emergency is an

event which is less remembered and which also has less ways of remembering whether it is in a personal context or in a national context.

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And this novel that we are discussing today *Rich Like Us*, it needs to be situated in the post-emergency context where a new type of literature with outrage and desire to expose the many events of emergency had begun to come up. So this was in many different forms which is prison memoirs, official judgment, resistance literature or political expose and just like the event emergency cannot be defined in an unidimensional way, the post-emergency narratives also had a multivocal and multi-dimensional quality to it.

So it is possible to say that the post-emergency narratives, the kind of literatures which began to emerge after emergency, they were also multivocal without any single emanating force.

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Emergency

- o Emma Tarlo's *Unsettling Memories: Narratives of Emergency in Delhi* (2003)
- o 'faded moment' . 'the silence'
- o "so much has it slipped out of public discourse that today it is remembered, if it is at all, for the extent to which it has been forgotten"

One of the works that I use as an entry point to understand this figuration of emergency in the fictional narratives is the work of Emma Tarlo. She has authored this wonderfully written work published in 2003 titled *Unsettling Memories, Narratives of Emergency in Delhi*. So here Emma Tarlo in her mostly ethnographic work she talks about the event of emergency as a faded moment.

She talks about the silence which has surrounded the many narratives and the many discussions related to the event of emergency and in her own words, so much has it slipped out of public discourse that today it is remembered, if at all, for the extent to which it has been forgotten. So Emma Tarlo sees these many narratives as efforts to dig out the forgotten aspects of this event of emergency.

And she talks about memories, she talks about narratives, she talks about how important it is to intervene with personal memories and personal narratives to counter what is when seen as an official rhetoric or an official narrative of emergency.

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Emergency fiction

- o "Press censorship, arrests, torture, the demolition of slums and tales of forcible sterilisation have all made the Emergency fertile food for fiction"
- o Dark Dispatches – Nirmal Verma
- o A Fine Balance – Rohinton Mistry
- o Midnight's Children – Salman Rushdie
- o "The Free Radio" – Salman Rushdie

And Tarlo also sees the emergence of emergency fiction, the kind of fictional works which are produced post-emergency talking about these various events related to emergency. She talks about this emergency fiction as one of the important ways in which the official narrative, the official new rhetoric of emergency can be occurred across through.

So to quote Tarlo again, press censorship, arrests, torture, the demolition of slums and tales and forcible sterilisation have all made the emergency fertile food for fiction and she also refers to some of the important works of the recent times which have the event of emergency as a backdrop, Nirmal Verma's Dark Dispatches, Rohinton Mistry's A Fine Balance, a novel which we shall be taking a look at very soon, Salman Rushdie's Midnight's Children of course and Rushdie's short story Free Radio which was published in his collection East West.

In all these works, we do see the event of emergency playing a very significant role in the backdrop especially and we also find very detailed discussions about press censorship, arrest, torture, forcible sterilisation etc. in all of these works.

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From *Rich like Us*

- The country is ruled by 'one and a half people'
- A disguised masquerade to prepare the country for family rule
- The millennium had arrived disguised as an emergency headed by a Mother Tsar, supported by a number of delegations and her big toe is already worn out with pilgrim kisses
- Citizens broken on the wheel for remembering their rights

It is in this context that I would like to state again that *Rich Like Us* is a very different novel from all of these emergency fiction. It does not give us graphic accounts of the many horrors which were part of the event of emergency. On the contrary, it gives a very direct political critic of this event of emergency which meant different things to different people.

And as we pointed out right at the beginning of this lecture that *Rich Like Us* is a novel which tries to give voice to the face in the crowd. It is not just about the general narrative or the general experience of what emergency is but it talks about certain kinds of individuals who are perhaps caught up in those specific moments and there were certain excerpts from *Rich Like Us* that I would like to present for your information.

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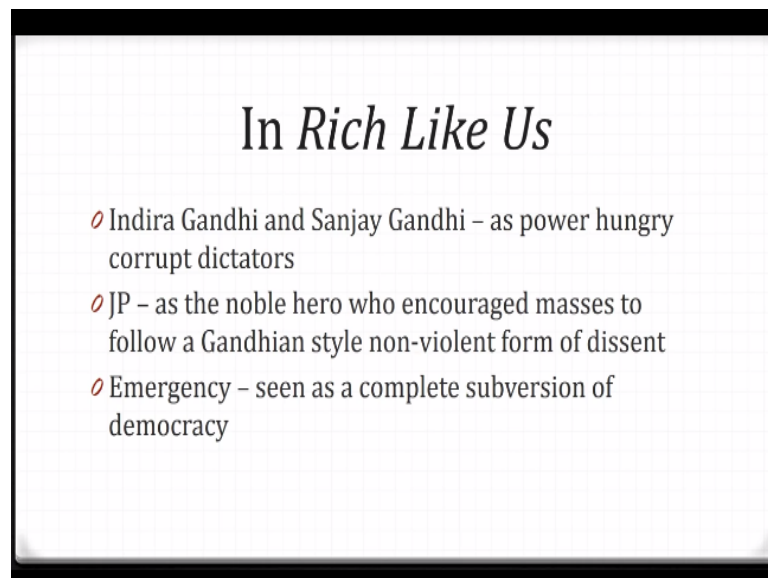
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In *Rich Like Us*, there are many instances and many kinds of political critics. It talks about the country which is ruled by one and a half people and it talks about a disguised masquerade to prepare the country for family rule and it is rather clear which rulers are being indicated over here and Sahgal also talks about this.

The millennium had arrived disguised as an emergency headed by a Mother Tsar, which is obviously a reference to Indira Gandhi supported by a number of delegations and her big toe is already worn out with pilgrim kisses. So the sarcasm over here it is really hard to miss. It also talks about how the citizens were broken on the wheel for remembering their rights. So this is a very sarcastic work.

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It is a very pointed satire against emergency and it also talks about certain individual such as Indira Gandhi and Sanjay Gandhi and presents them as power hungry corrupt dictators and Jayaprakash Narayan is presented as a foil to these corrupt politicians and presents JP as a noble hero who encouraged masses to follow a Gandhian style of non-violent form of dissent. An emergency as a whole in *Rich Like Us* can be seen is presented as a complete subversion of democracy.

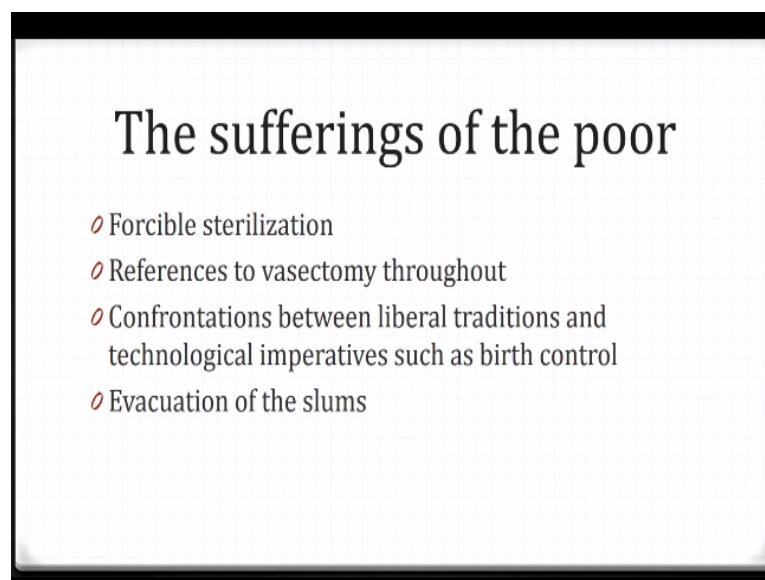
A number of works from different disciplines such as sociology and political science, they have already talking a lot about how the emergency could be seen as an event which completely thwarted and completely challenged the many ideals of democracy and in *Rich Like us* we find a very succinct portrayal of emergency being presented as I repeat a complete subversion of democracy.

Before we move on, it is very important to see how emergency has been presented, how it has been critiqued in number of other popular accounts. Ashis Nandy talks about the enormous political effort that has gone into wiping out the emergency as a life memory and he also talks about how difficult it is to remember an event such as emergency because there are no official ways of remembering this almost forgotten and less talked about event.

And it also talks about the shifting of narratives from pre to post emergency and Emma Tarlo herself points out that emergency is seen as a one-way ticket to modernism. In that context, she also reminds us that the narratives of the emergency were made available to us from different sources such as the politicians, bureaucrats, officials and journalists. So it is very difficult to find out which is the right kind of narrative which is the correct official one and which is the one which has been perpetrated for a lot of other western interest.

So again it is in these multiple context that we see the significance of a work of fiction such as Rich Like Us, which has been presented towards in the form of a commentary, in the form of a critic and also more importantly in the form of a sarcastic satire.

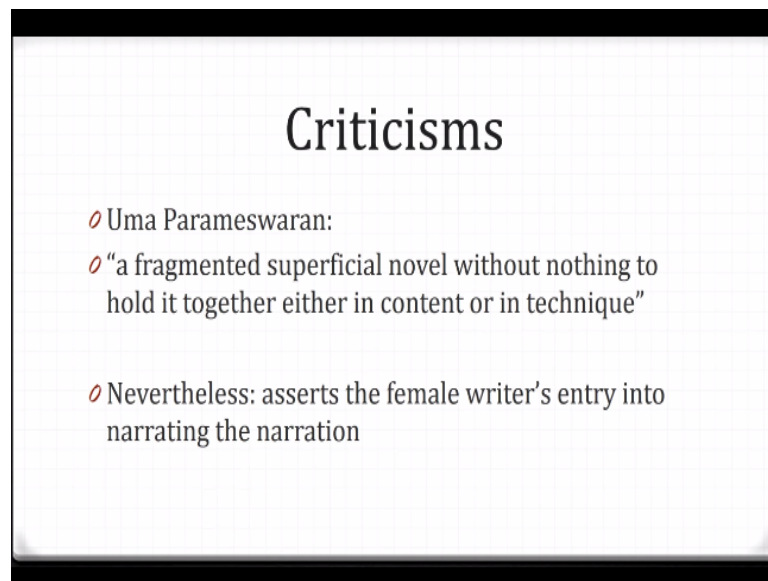
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Sahgal's Rich Like Us takes a particular care to talk about the sufferings of the poor. This is mostly in the context of the forcible sterilisations which were part of the emergency period. There are references to vasectomy throughout this novel and there are also a lot of references to the confrontations between liberal traditions and technological imperative such as birth control.

And Sahgal uses these as entry points to talk about how in certain specific political context, the liberal traditions and technological imperatives are faced to confront or made to confront each other in ways they do not happen in otherwise “in normal situations” and of course there are instances of the evacuation of the slums, which are again part of the emergency period which was also heavily critiqued in the later political periods as we all know.

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It is important to remember that there were also severe criticisms against this work. Uma Parameswaran for an instance had referred to this novel as a fragmented superficial novel without nothing to hold it together either in content or in technique and this was written in a review by Uma Parameswaran which appeared in an article which appeared in 1986 in the journal World Literature Today.

In this review, Uma Parameswaran talks about the many successes that Nayantara Sahgal enjoyed in her earlier ventures but however she also points out that in this particular novel because of the many ways in which Sahgal had perhaps been trying to infuse a political narrative or perhaps because of the phony nature of the political world that she had been trying to present, Parameswaran feels that this has come out as being extremely fragmented and superficial.

Whether we agree with this point of view, whether we agree with this review or not, it is very important to note that Sahgal’s novel Rich Like Us is one of the very few novels which assert the female writer’s entry into narrating the nation. If we survey the entire gamut of writing

under Indian writing in English and whenever we talk about narrating the nation or the nation being narrated it has been mostly considered as a male forte.

It is mostly the male writers who had been presented as the once with legitimate kind of right to talk about the nation, critic the nation and to present the many narratives and the many sided stories of the nation. In this context, we see Sahgal's significance being really exemplary because she continues to be one on the very few who has written a political satire, who has written out a political critic and commentary of a significant period of the nation that is the emergency period.

And before we wind up, it is important to take a very quick look at the outline of the story, the brief summary of the story though we shall not be giving out the summaries and analysis as part of these lectures. You are expected to read the novel on your own and understand its main concerns and the main themes; however, before we wind up, I shall be giving a brief outline of what the story is all about, about the different kinds of things that the novel talks about.

As indicated in the beginning, this is about two characters, the main protagonists who are caught in this moment of emergency and the many different directions in which their lives take off post-emergency. In a nutshell, the story is about two victims of the emergency; the names are Sonali and Rose. Sonali is presented as an honest, hardworking and an intelligent civil servant.

And she is demoted and posted to the backwards by the new bosses of the new regime and she also ends up with a new carrier as a researcher for an English business tycoon who is interested in mid eighteenth century culture. So this is the way Sonali is being portrayed. We also find fine nuances, fine ways in which Sonali's Indian character encounters the many British ways and the many British backgrounds and concerns.

And on the other hand, we have the other character Rose who is Cockney mistress and a latter wife of Ram Surya, one of the characters of the novel and Ram Surya is a Hindu business tycoon with virtues of patriotism, intellect and imagination and those virtues are mostly hidden in most parts of this narrative and we also have Ram Surya's son who is opportunistic and he is also in league with the dark powers in the novel.

And incidentally, it is the kind of association that Ram Surya's son keeps that also gets Rose killed and thrown into an old well towards the later sections of the novel. So much of this narrative is woven around the lives of these two women, Sonali and Rose. Sonali being this the embodiment of middleclass virtues of hardworking middleclass civil servant and Rose being someone who is slightly distanced from the political realities of the nation.

But nevertheless gets involved due to the many relations and due to the many confusions that she is thrown into amidst the relationships that she has and in these bookended between these two female characters Rose and Sonali, we find the entire narrative of emergency on winding being unravel to us in many different ways.

And what especially important about Sahgal's narrative is that in spite of the story, in spite of the alternativeness of the story that she narrates, she never misses the political sarcasm or the political satire that has been at the backdrop of this novel throughout right from the beginning of its narration. I would like to wrap up this discussion with a very powerful quote from one of the reviewers of Rich Like Us, Maria Couto.

And Maria Couto in one of her reviews which was also a review which had presented Rich Like Us in a very favorable light. Maria Couto points out that Rich Like Us offers a cohesive and intimate portrait of the intrigues of power and this is extremely important and again I reiterate Sahgal's novel. Sahgal's narrative in Rich Like Us, it continues to be important for us because this is again one of those rare novels which talk about the intrigues of power.

It is one of those rare, canonical, well accepted, award winning novels of the body of Indian writing in English again written by a women which also talks about the many intrigues of power, politics and relationships, all packaged into a single post-emergency narrative titled Rich Like Us. I hope you will really enjoy reading this novel though we have not given out a detailed discussion of the main characters and the analysis and the themes and the many ways in which the narrative progresses.

I hope that this has given you a sufficient introduction to approach the novel, a background in which the readings of the novel can be situated and I hope you will have an interesting journey reading through the novel trying to analyze it and also more importantly in a broad

respect trying to situate Rich Like Us within the larger frameworks whether in which Indian writing in English has been talked about analyzed and critiqued.

With this I leave you to your reading of the novel Rich Like Us. Thank you for listening to this segment.