

WOUNDED/TORTURED BODIES IN NAYANTARA SAHGAL'S *RICH LIKE US*

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Abstract: *This paper analyses the different aspects of the body metaphor used by Nayantara Sahgal in her novel Rich Like Us (1985). It is argued that the broken, fractured bodies in the novel are graphic sites where we can read the colonial and postcolonial experiences and politics of embodiment, including questions of violence, disease, consumption, oppression and resistance, sexuality and gender. The disabled, battered, powerless bodies, depictions of scars, markings and torture, mutilations allegorically represent the degradation in the body politic in the context of India's political and historical crisis. Through a close explication of the text, the paper hopes to demonstrate how the broken, wounded, often grotesque bodies in Sahgal's text bear the violent effects of history and repressive power structures during the colonial period as well as during the Emergency. To read the postcolonial Indian nation or its history, the body or corporeality emerges as a powerful trope. Such a reading of the corporeal specificities in the text and the close connection of corporeality to history and politics is significant because it might shed crucial insights in to the relationship between body, sexuality, disability, gender, nation and state formation.*

Keywords: Sahgal, corporeality, History, Nation-state, Postcolonial, The emergency

I. Introduction

The body or corporeality is of significant importance in postcolonial literature and theory. In her book *Spatial Politics in the Postcolonial Novel*, Upstone (2009) argues that "postcolonial texts aim to magically reconfigure the body's significance in a way that marks the ultimate reduction of spatial scales, as the site of greatest colonization becomes a resource facilitating the most powerful statements of resistance". The body is a vital site by means of which structures of power, knowledge, meaning and desire get established. Minorities and the colonized, the

oppressed suffer bodily subjugation in the hands of the colonizer and dominant power structures. Not only colonization, but history in general writes some of its most abusive and graphic messages on the bodies of victims. In the words of Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin (1995),

The body...has become then the literal site on which resistance and oppression have struggled, with the weapons being in both cases the physical signs of cultural difference, veils and wigs, to use Kadiatu Kenneh's terms, symbols and literal occasions of the power struggles of the dominator and dominated for possession of control and identity.

The most important questions of agency of the oppressed, the colonized and the marginalized, and of postcolonial identity can, to a large extent, be tackled through a close reading of the corporeal metaphors deployed in literary texts, because, as Stallybras and White (1986) contends "the body cannot be thought separately from the social formation".

The representation of history and the nation has been addressed quite distinctively and forcefully in Indian English novels from its very inception during the colonial times. Indian English novels, especially those that emerged in the 1980s and since, are engaged in a fundamentally ideological conflict over how to represent the nation and its history. In any discussion of Indian English novels, it has rarely been pointed out that many of them foreground the fictional interface of body and history, and highlight the corporealizing process of Indian history. Novels like *Train to Pakistan* (1956) by Khushwant Singh, *Midnight's Children* (1981) by Salman Rushdie, *The Trotter-Nama* (1988) by I. Allan Sealy, *Baumgartner's Bombay* (1988) by Anita Desai, *Looking Through Glass* (1995) by Mukul Kesavan, *A Fine Balance* (1995) by Rohinton Mistry, *Rich Like Us* (1985) by Nayantara Sahgal etc. to name just a few, intervene in the ideologically charged issue of imaging the nation by making powerful use of the body metaphor as a way of assessing the severe social problems afflicting postcolonial India. Like most postcolonial writers from other regions, these writers also make abundant use of corporeal imageries in making sense of the trauma, violence, chaos, and cruelty of history.

Salman Rushdie's novel *Midnight's Children* is a prime example of how individual bodies are inscribed with historical conflicts and paradoxes. Throughout the novel, Rushdie charts the disintegration and dissolution of the social body through the exploration of the grotesque condition and dissolution of Saleem's body. Rushdie's extravagant body metaphors

make a mockery of the Nehruvian ideals of nationhood and bourgeois nationalist history as proposed by Jawaharlal Nehru in *The Discovery of India* (1946). Saleem's body suffers multiple injuries and mutilation—it splits, disintegrates, and cracks due to the unbearable burden of history. In *Midnight's Children* of Rushdie (1982) Saleem says:

Please believe that I am falling apart. I have begun to crack up like an old jug—that my poor body, singular, unlovely, buffeted by too much history, subjected to drainage above and drainage below, mutilated by doors, brained by spittoons, has started coming apart at the seams.

His cracked up body is a metonym for the disintegration of the democratic, liberal ideology of the sub-continental narrative. Grotesque bodies or body features in the novel, and especially Saleem's condition, mirror the pathologies of the postcolonial nation with all its conflicts and contradictions. I. Allan Sealy in his novel *The Trotter-Nama* celebrates and highlights the corporeal differences of Mik and other Anglo-Indians from the colonial British who insulted and marginalized them because of their dark skins. At the same time, in providing them a counter-canonical status in the novel, Sealy attempts to recuperate this colonized subject's body since it had been rendered insignificant, invisible, maimed, ignored—and to transform its signification and its subjectivity. Mukul Kesavan's *Looking through Glass* represents the issues of embodiment, and the dynamics of physical visibility and invisibility while dealing with the complex and controversial question of nationalist agency or identity. The violence and horror of the Partition and the accompanying communal hatred was transferred and inscribed onto the bodies of the members of the opposing communities. The unspeakable physical violence of the Partition is depicted in Khushwant Singh's *Pakistan* and Bapsi Sidhwa's *Ice-Candy Man*. The violence of the Emergency era is depicted by Rushdie and also by Mistry and Sahgal in corporeal terms. In Mistry's novel *A Fine Balance* we have depictions of tortured bodies of a brutal nation-state. The chapter examines the depiction of wounding, markings, scars and torture in the bodies to show how the violent effects of history are seen on the texts of individual bodies. It will examine the depiction of markings, scars, torture, and disabilities in the human bodies to show how the texts of individual bodies bear the violent effects of history and a repressive nation. The mutilated personal and political freedom and its precarious survival in the dark days of the Emergency imposed by Indira Gandhi are depicted by Sahgal in her powerful

novel. Such a reading will help us see that the body is often the text on which power structures and history write their violent effects. Boehmer (1993) writes about the presence of the pervasive figure of the “silenced, wounded body of the colonized” in colonial and postcolonial discourses. This reading of *Rich Like Us* will help us see such figures in the context of India’s political and historical crisis.

II. Methodology

This paper would examine how Nayantara Sahgal’s novel *Rich Like Us* reproduces the strategies by which the body politic or history of the sub-continent is represented through the ‘body’. The paper would make an attempt to chart the depictions of corporeal effects of the deteriorating health of the democratic ethos of the country, and the plights of the citizens under the brutal bureaucratic system of the postcolonial nation-state. To do so, the paper will draw on various strands of critical ideas from Postcolonial Theory. A close reading of the text will be made in the light of these theories regarding the connection of corporeality and power-structures, and the violent effects of history and state machinations on the bodies of citizens.

III. The Emergency and Corporeality in Sahgal’s Novel

In Sahgal’s novel we see broken, disabled bodies symbolizing the effects of ruthless state machinations on the hapless citizens. The broken, fractured bodies in *Rich Like Us* metaphorize the postcolonial nation’s desires to subjugate and control the common people. In other words, the novel exposes the hegemonic tendencies of the structures of power, especially during the dark days of the Emergency, to limit the rights and freedom of the citizens, and often the pluralistic essence of Indian identity.

The period of Emergency was undoubtedly the lowest point in the history of postcolonial India. This was the biggest blow to the social-democratic ideals of the nation. This state of Emergency, which was declared by Mrs. Gandhi in 1975 solely to protect her political position, resulted in the mass arrest of opposition leaders, the cancellation of elections, a ban on strikes and the suspension of press freedom. It led to brutal violations of human rights which culminated in the infamous policies of indiscriminate slum-clearance and enforced sterilization. Thousands were detained without trial and a series of totally illegal and unwarranted actions followed involving untold human misery and suffering. This nightmarish period in Indian history has been

the focus of many novels written in the 1980s and 90s: Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981), *The Satanic Verses* (1988), Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* (1988), Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel* (1989), Rohinton Mistry's *Such A Long Journey* (1991), *A Fine Balance* (1995), Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy* (1993), *Rich Like Us* (Nayantara Sahgal) etc. While Rushdie employs fantasy and satire, and Shashi Tharoor adopts mythological situations and characters in depicting the Indian scene under the authoritarian regime of Mrs. Gandhi, Nayantara Sahgal's *Rich Like Us* gives us a realistic depiction in Indian English fiction of the National Emergency. As Mathur (1991) says:

It is in Nayantara Sahgal's *Rich Like Us*, however, that the realities of this brief nightmarish period have been translated into human terms without any of their repulsiveness being lost. In this novel we find an intermingling of the individual and contemporary politics and how the suffocating political environment bears down upon the lives of a few sensitive people.

The novel exposes the reality of the repressive Emergency in all its ugly aspects. During the Emergency, thousands of people were held under detention without trial, and "citizens [are] broken on the wheel for remembering their rights" (p. 258). The farmers and the workers were exploited and the resources of the whole nation were quietly used for the benefit of a few. In forced vasectomy camps, even the old and the unmarried are not spared. In the novel, the protagonist Sonali says: "It did not need much imagination to sense the hate and fear inside the vans with iron-barred windows, like the ones used for collecting stray dogs for drowning, that now roamed the streets picking up citizens for vasectomy" (p. 27). People who were deemed to be obstacles to the regimes and the state, the opposition and the strikers, were just bodies to be controlled, jailed and punished. As an active supporter of the new regime, Dev justifies the detention of people by stating that it had brought stability to the country and created healthy climate for business, trade and industry: "...this emergency is just what we needed. The troublemakers are in jail. An opposition is something we never needed... Strikes are banned" (p. 10). The "other" bodies of the selfish, corrupt state are made powerless by brutal means. The disabled, powerless bodies in the novel are stark reminders of a nation that has failed to deliver its promised freedom and security even so long after the Independence.

Sahgal's novel also depicts instances of torture of bodies during the time of the Emergency. The travails of Kishori Lal typify this tendency of the time. When he is arrested, he is slapped, pushed, prodded, humiliated, and, finally, put in a lockup because he is branded an RSS man. Like several others, he is charged with being a "saboteur, part of a conspiracy to overthrow the government" (p. 190). The prisoners are tortured in all sorts of ways: "upside-down hangings, rods up anuses, lighted cigarettes held to tender organs" (207). The prison officials, in their keenness to carry out the task of the government make new experiments of torturing the inmates.

These scenes of tortured bodies in jails make us see the level of degradation in the body politic; that "righteousness had decayed and rotted. And there was no sign of renewal or rescue" (p. 214). But to cover it up, the official media had started legitimizing its actions by offering their version of things. That is why he fears "that history would now be revised and rewritten. All dictatorship meddled with history" (p. 175). What becomes evident in the narrative of the novel is that this rewriting of history is done on the expense of the bodies of the powerless. In the novel, Sahgal displays that "[T]he degrees of disempowerment are played out through bodies, their natural function and their fragility" (Morey, 2000). This can be seen most vividly in the figure of the beggar whose hands were chopped off by the landlord for taking his legitimate share of the harvest. He is a grotesque figure who was unwittingly caught up in the dark currents of the Emergency:

Only the face was still a face...on a neck no thicker than a stalk where the stumps, once arms, joined the body, were the archways of the bone. Altogether a great bone arch more insect than animal, inching diagonally across the road on its knees. A monster ant but for the eye gleaming with intelligence. (p. 16)

The beggar, though a minor character in the novel, is still a powerful symbol of the effects of the ruthless state machinations. Makarand Paranjape observes: "The crippled beggar is perhaps the most important symbol in the book...the beggar represents the Indian masses who have been battered and crippled by the ruling classes. They are silent and helpless...Victims of endless oppression and injustice" (p. 141). In Rohinton Mistry's novel *A Fine Balance* also we have similar figures of beggars—the legless Shankar a. k. a. 'Worm', and the two tailors Ishvar and Om who having fled caste oppression in their village, had been compelled to beggary after

being broken physically by the vasectomy drive in the city during the Emergency. During this long, nightmarish period, the democratic ethos of the country was severely damaged: there were mass arrests and people were held without trial and tortured in jails; bans were imposed on strikes and protests. The most draconian measures were put into effect by the state on the citizens to crush any possible opposition to the tyranny of the government. The most gruesome aspect of the emergency was the infamous policies of indiscriminate slum clearance and enforced sterilization, the latter claiming thousands of lives and mutilating countless others for life. In their realistic depiction of these terrible state policies and their grim effects on the masses, both Sahgal's *Rich Like Us* and Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* become "...damning indictment of a body politic which attempt to perfect the larger body of India by getting rid of its anonymous imperfect bodies and preventing their proliferation" (Morey, 2000). The eviction of slum-dwellers and forced vasectomies can, thus, be seen as the attempts by the state to "discipline and punish" (Foucault, 1977) the people who are deemed to be threat to its interests.

IV. Connecting the Past and the Present—Body and Patriarchy

Sahgal's novel brings up another issue of significance: the issue *sati* or bride-burning/self-immolation of Hindu women which illustrates another form of corporeal violation/violence on female agency. Sahgal like many contemporary feminist critics and social historians see the ritual of *sati* as an instance of patriarchal/traditional and political domination that takes physical forms. Though Sahgal depicts *sati* as a problem of the past, she connects the past to the present when she reveals that the torture or violation of female bodies is commonplace in the country. This is revealed by Sahgal when she mentions the rapes and killings of lower-caste/class women in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar.

Sahgal exposes the dark side of the Hindu cultural tradition of *sati* by showing how women's bodies were often used as symbols of religious and nationalist sentiments. She narrates the life and death of the grandmother of Sonali (the main protagonist in the novel) who had died as a *sati* and was burnt alive. Sahgal reveals how the women in those days had no freedom of choice and their lives were molded and directed by customs and cultural practices constructed by patriarchy and certain tenets of nationalist ideology. It was claimed by men that the women had willingly undergone *sati*. But Sahgal denies this claim and insists that they were often drugged

and sedated (so that they cannot scream) and dragged them to the pyres. But the novel also recognizes that superstition and socio-cultural pressures also made many women accept their fate. When some of them tried to run away and protested, they were given punishment for that, too. Sahgal describes the fate of one widow who refused to return to the pyre after escaping:

When the inhuman relatives saw this, they took her by the head and heels and threw her into the fire, and held her there till they were driven away by the heat; they also took up large blocks of wood with which they struck her, in order to deprive her of her senses, but she again made her escape, and without any help ran directly into the river...The people of her house followed her here and tried to drown her by pressing her under water. (p. 154)

A woman, once she is marked out to become a *sati*, cannot turn back as this meant an act of unforgivable transgression and a matter of great shame and dishonor for the family. Through this exposure of the shameful practice and tradition of *sati*, Sahgal denounces the patriarchal and oppressive form of Hinduism. Through this narration of the practice of *sati*, Sahgal also depicts the corporeal and violent side of tradition, history and social practices in Indian society.

V. Conclusion

Sahgal's novel *Rich Like Us* is invested with the corporeal specificities of the violence and chaos inflicted by history. Bodies, Sara Ahmed writes, are capable of remembering "histories, even when we forget them" (Ahmed, 2006). The novel helps us to recognize that the body is a graphic site where we can read a specific account of the colonial and postcolonial experience and politics of embodiment, including questions of violence, disease, consumption, oppression and resistance, sexuality and gender, whether treated realistically or allegorically. To read the postcolonial Indian nation or its history, the body or corporeality emerges as a powerful trope. The brutality of the state and history gets inscribed in the cracking, disintegrating, sick, distorted bodies of the characters. Reading bodies and the violation and wounding of bodies gains significance when we come to the embodied politics of gendered violence. The issues related to the close connection of corporeality and history in the text is insightful for scholars who seek to write a *long durée* history of the relationship between body, sexuality, disability, gender, nation and state formation. In "Transfiguring: Colonial Body into Postcolonial

Narrative” Boehmer (1992) says, “when national histories are revealed as stochastic, divided, painful, the body, too, is exposed as fissured, reduced”. Reading the bodily or corporeal specificities of the novels with regard to the history and the state of the nation help us see the truth of this statement. The grotesque, tortured, broken bodies in Sahgal’s text by intervening effectively in to dominant discourse show their subversive potential though victimized by power and harried at the hands of history. Mostly, this critique is directed against the ruthless autocratic authority that is exhibited in the postcolonial nation in tandem with a corrupt bureaucracy. In this case, it is evident that the bodies are propelled into their grotesque forms and states of victimizations by the onslaught of historical forces. But at the same time these bodies make an effective intervention into and contestation with the dominant discourses or master narratives of history.

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