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Cultural Hybridity and Identity in Nayantara Sahgal's *Rich Like Us*

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ABSTRACT: Nayantara Sahgal's *Rich Like Us* (1985) is a profound exploration of cultural hybridity and identity in post-colonial India. Set against the backdrop of the Emergency (1975–1977), the novel delves into the complexities of identity formation in a society shaped by colonial legacies and cultural intersections. Through characters like Rose, an Englishwoman married to an Indian businessman, and Sonali, an Indian civil servant, Sahgal examines the tensions and negotiations inherent in hybrid identities. This paper argues that *Rich Like Us* highlights the fluidity of identity in a post-colonial context, emphasizing the challenges and opportunities of cultural hybridity. Drawing on Homi K. Bhabha's theory of cultural hybridity, the paper analyses how Sahgal's characters navigate their dual identities and the broader implications for post-colonial India.

KEYWORD: Colonial legacies, Cultural intersections, Hybrid identities, Fluidity of identity, Homi K. Bhabha, Dual identities, post-colonial context.

I. INTRODUCTION

Nayantara Sahgal's *Rich Like Us* is a seminal work in Indian English literature that explores the socio-political landscape of post-colonial India. The novel is set during the Emergency, a period marked by political repression and social upheaval, and it uses this context to examine the complexities of cultural hybridity and identity. Sahgal, a member of the Nehru-Gandhi family, brings a unique perspective to her writing, blending personal and political narratives to critique the failures of the post-colonial state.

Cultural hybridity, a concept popularized by post-colonial theorist Homi K. Bhabha, refers to the blending of cultural identities that occurs in colonial and post-colonial contexts. In *Rich Like Us*, Sahgal portrays characters who embody this hybridity, particularly Rose, an Englishwoman who marries into an Indian family, and Sonali, an Indian woman navigating the tensions between tradition and modernity. Through these characters, Sahgal explores the challenges of living between cultures and the ways in which hybrid identities are shaped by historical, social, and political forces.

This paper examines the theme of cultural hybridity in *Rich Like Us*, focusing on the characters of Rose and Sonali. It argues that Sahgal uses these characters to critique the rigid boundaries of identity imposed by colonialism and to envision a more inclusive and fluid understanding of cultural belonging.

II. CULTURAL HYBRIDITY AND THE CHARACTER OF ROSE

Rose, an Englishwoman married to an Indian businessman, is a central figure in *Rich Like Us*. Her character embodies the complexities of cultural hybridity, as she navigates the tensions between her English heritage and her adopted Indian identity. Rose's marriage to Dev is symbolic of the cultural intersections that define post-colonial India, but it also highlights the challenges of living between two worlds.

Rose's hybrid identity is marked by a sense of dislocation and alienation. Despite her efforts to adapt to Indian culture, she remains an outsider, both in her husband's family and in Indian society at large. Her Englishness is a constant reminder of the colonial past, and it shapes the way she is perceived by others. For example, her sister-in-law, Mona, views her with suspicion and resentment, seeing her as a symbol of British imperialism.

However, Rose's hybridity also gives her a unique perspective on Indian society. As an outsider, she is able to see the contradictions and injustices that others take for granted. Her relationship with Sonali, for instance, is based on a shared



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sense of marginalization and a desire for autonomy. Through Rose, Sahgal critiques the rigid boundaries of identity imposed by colonialism and suggests that hybridity can be a source of strength and resilience.

Bhabha (1994) argues that hybridity disrupts the binary oppositions of colonial discourse, creating a "third space" where new forms of identity and cultural expression can emerge. In *Rich Like Us*, Rose's character embodies this "third space," challenging the fixed categories of identity and offering a more fluid and inclusive understanding of cultural belonging.

III. SONALI: TRADITION, MODERNITY, AND HYBRID IDENTITY

Sonali, an Indian civil servant, represents another dimension of cultural hybridity in *Rich Like Us*. As a single, career-oriented woman, Sonali challenges traditional gender roles and embodies the tensions between tradition and modernity in post-colonial India. Her identity is shaped by her education, her professional ambitions, and her commitment to social justice, but it is also constrained by the patriarchal norms of Indian society.

Sonali's hybridity is evident in her ability to navigate different cultural spaces. As a civil servant, she moves between the world of the elite and the world of the marginalized, exposing the inequalities and injustices that define Indian society. Her relationship with Rose, for example, is based on a shared sense of alienation and a desire for autonomy, transcending the boundaries of race, class, and culture.

However, Sonali's hybrid identity is also a source of conflict and tension. Her professional success is undermined by the sexism and corruption she encounters in her workplace, and her personal life is marked by a sense of isolation and dislocation. Through Sonali, Sahgal critiques the limitations of hybridity in a society that remains deeply divided along lines of gender, class, and caste.

Jain (2005) argues that Sahgal's female characters, including Sonali, are emblematic of the broader struggles of women in post-colonial India. By portraying Sonali as a hybrid figure, Sahgal highlights the challenges of living between cultures and the ways in which hybrid identities are shaped by historical, social, and political forces.

The Broader Implications of Cultural Hybridity in Post-Colonial India

Through the characters of Rose and Sonali, Sahgal explores the broader implications of cultural hybridity for post-colonial India. The novel suggests that hybridity is both a source of strength and a site of conflict, reflecting the complexities of identity formation in a society shaped by colonialism and globalization.

Sahgal's portrayal of cultural hybridity challenges the binary oppositions of colonial discourse, offering a more fluid and inclusive understanding of identity. However, the novel also highlights the limitations of hybridity in a society that remains deeply divided along lines of race, class, and gender. Through Rose and Sonali, Sahgal critiques the rigid boundaries of identity imposed by colonialism and envisions a more inclusive and equitable vision of cultural belonging.

Mishra (2012) argues that Sahgal's novel is a powerful indictment of the failures of the post-colonial state, which has perpetuated the inequalities and injustices of the colonial era. By situating her narrative within the context of the Emergency, Sahgal underscores the need for a more inclusive and fluid understanding of identity in post-colonial India.

IV. CONCLUSION

Nayantara Sahgal's *Rich Like Us* is a profound exploration of cultural hybridity and identity in post-colonial India. Through the characters of Rose and Sonali, Sahgal examines the tensions and negotiations inherent in hybrid identities, highlighting the challenges and opportunities of living between cultures. The novel critiques the rigid boundaries of identity imposed by colonialism and envisions a more inclusive and fluid understanding of cultural belonging.

By situating her narrative within the context of the Emergency, Sahgal underscores the broader implications of cultural hybridity for post-colonial India. The novel suggests that hybridity is both a source of strength and a site of conflict, reflecting the complexities of identity formation in a society shaped by historical, social, and political forces. As a work



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of post-colonial literature, *Rich Like Us* remains relevant today, challenging readers to confront the enduring legacies of colonialism and the ongoing struggles for equality and justice.

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