

Nation and Nationalism(s): A Study of Two Anglophone Indian Novels by Women¹

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Abstract

This paper undertakes a reading of Attia Hossain's *Sunlight on a Broken Column* (first published in 1961) and Nayantara Sahgal's *Rich Like Us* (first published in 1985) to underscore how the relationship between the 'nation' and 'nationalism' and women get problematized. According to Partha Chatterjee, 'The Woman's Question' had been subsumed by the nationalist struggle for Independence, this paper's objectives are to explore the range of women's responses to 'nationalism'. The two novels, each written by a Hindu and a Muslim upper-class woman of post-Independent India were published two decades apart but they both go back to the history of the nationalist freedom struggle to come to terms with their present. This paper aims to explore how women's fictional narratives lead to a contestation of the terrain of 'nationalism' and how they contribute towards a renewal of their history and identity.

Keywords: women, nationalism, fiction, nation.

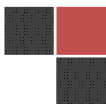
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According to Priyamvada Gopal, the genre of the Indian English novel “...has been distinguished from its inception by a preoccupation with both *history* and *nation*...” (Gopal 5). However, English being the language of formal education and the public sphere had been a tool accessible primarily to men until after Independence. Therefore, though in scarce numbers, the canonization of Indian women novelists in English is perhaps one of the most striking features of the decade 1950-60s in the history of the post-colonial Indian novel (Narayan and Mee 248). Among other things, anglophone Indian fiction by women of post-Independence India is significant in two capacities: as Indians writing in English to an international audience, hence participating in the anti-colonial activity of ‘writing back to the empire’¹ and as women speaking to and for a nation, beyond regional or linguistic boundaries with an opportunity to challenge hegemonic ideas of the nation as inscribed by the Indian English canon. If women’s writing is categorized separately, it can be questioned if women experience and perceive differently from men? Jasbir Jain argues that the different range of experiences women go through necessitate a different mode of expression. She adds that “...difference is not opposition but one rooted in the individual being and underlies identity. As such individual women are also different from each other...” (Jain 1655) Here it should also be noted that while middle-class Hindu women still had a specific role and place in the nationalist movement after the Hindu revivalism in 19th century, Muslims among other groups were alienated from the discourses of Indian nationalism and nation-building. In fact, the big three novelists of the Gandhian phase of Indo- English fiction, Anand, Rao and Narayan depicted a cultural milieu rarely featuring any Muslim presence. Considering the contentious history of the Indian Muslim community, novels by Indian Muslims, especially by individual Indian Muslim women about the nation and its history are of value for our consideration. Aparna Basu in her review of Antoinette Burton’s *Dwelling in the Archives* notes how the growth of social history has resulted in the usage of

“...fiction, memoirs, journals, biographies, autobiographies and oral history to write about the past as seen by women since women’s lives and perceptions cannot be reconstituted from official archival records. Antoinette Burton adds one more source—the house or home.” (Basu 3244)

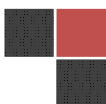
Since the conception of ‘home’ goes beyond a physical space to mean “women’s emotional lives, experiences and priorities” women’s fictions like Attia Hosain’s *Sunlight on a Broken Column* (first published in 1961)² and Nayantara Sahgal’s *Rich Like Us* (first published in 1985)³ can be treated as an important recourse to the nation’s history. The study focuses on the domestic front or the private space to uncover how Hosain fills the absences and exclusions in the broader, official discourses of the nationalist struggle for Independence and partition and Sahgal does the same for that of Emergency in India.

For the purpose of the present study, before venturing forth to textually analyze the novels, it would do well to remember Partha Chatterjee’s comment “...nationalism was not simply about a political struggle for power: it related the question of the political independence of the nation to virtually every aspect of the material and spiritual life of the people” (Chatterjee 624). Though it would be ironical, at this point a reference can be made to Virginia Woolf’s problematization of the relationship women have traditionally had with their ‘nations’ in her essay *Three Guineas*. She says since historically women were systematically excluded from practically every public



institution and service which connects an individual with his or her national community such as education, law, finance or military and other professional fields, for them the nation or pride for it is not the same as that of men's. She further states that while men physically and literally possess the nation through ownership of its land and property, through their almost exclusive right to administer its people and fight for them, they own all the patronage, rewards and material valuables associated with, women have not possessed any of that in their own right (Woolf 116). Woolf implies that for women to get even a sliver of the share enjoyed by men, they would have to get married. Marriage was the only 'profession' or path to recognition for women, hence their relationship with the nation or nationalism is inevitably mediated through and determined by men. In the Indian context, Partha Chatterjee has elaborated on how the emergence of Indian nationalism resolved 'The Woman Question' through the formation of new patriarchies necessitated by the western attack on the existing native cultures. This was done by exploitatively symbolizing the dichotomy between the private and the public worlds as the separation between the spiritual and the material. In other words, the division between the domestic sphere of the woman and the public world of the man was perpetuated as a cultural necessity in the wake of nationalistic struggle against western colonialism (Chatterjee 120). Since the private or domestic sphere was thought to be socio-politically irrelevant it could be kept away from the direct influence of the West. Therefore, it enabled Indian men, to privilege the inner world of the '*ghar*' or home which was still under their control as a spiritual domain free from external contamination, as something which was essentially 'Indian'. It helped them to justify the various adaptive changes they had to make in their external or material world or '*bahir*' while submitting to the British colonial masters. Subsequently, though women were incorporated into public life they remained within the same signifying system demarcating their role and position. Rajeswari Sunder Rajan also affirms that "Different kinds of *actual* (social) values have been attached to each domain [the private and the public], though conceptually the two have been treated as equal and complementary" (Rajan 72). She further states that "with the emergence of feminist consciousness..., the questioning of the very separation of the spheres began" (Rajan 72). Sahgal's and Hosain's narratives challenge the division as they focus on the domestic sphere as well as the public sphere. They show how the events dominating in the larger nation is prefigured in the domestic space, in interpersonal relationships and alternatively how changes in the external public determine personal trajectories of the characters. These two women's expressions of the ideas of the nation and nationalism, therefore, locate themselves at the intersection of the emergence of the feminist idea – 'personal is political' and the consequent need to re-evaluate the significance of the private space and 'home'.

Attia Hosain was from an aristocratic Muslim family based in Lucknow. She had received Western education and was also influenced by the Progressive Writers Group. As a woman writer from a heterogeneous minority community, Hosain's voice does not integrate into the Hindu majoritarian discourses of the Indian National Congress. A considerable section of Indian Muslims was alienated from the nationalism professed by the Congress which could not remain detached from the Nineteenth century 'Hindu Revivalism' (Daiya 32). Nayantara Sahgal also comes from a politically significant elite family. Sahgal's is an account of an insider, one who was directly affiliated to the Indian National Congress which dominates the history of Indian nationalism. The second of the three daughters of Vijaylakshmi Pandit and R.S. Pandit, she was one of the few Indian



women who had access to the murkier inside- world of the Indian polity. Despite being a member of the Indian ruling class, she is self-reflexive in her novels to the extent of scathingly criticizing members of her own family and their associates for their actions preceding and during the Emergency.

Laila, the protagonist of Hosain's only novel, *Sunlight on a Broken Column* is also shown to be from Lucknow's Taluqdari Muslim family. She is shown to have received the benefit of modern Western education. Hosain's novel explores the protagonist's consciousness simultaneously in relation to the oppressive traditions of her own family, the complicated dynamics between the members of her community and the broader national politics involving the British colonialists and the Hindu anti-colonials. Through tracing the fortunes of Laila's aristocratic family across generations before and after the Independence and depicting the lives of the various inhabitants of her family's ancestral houses both in Lucknow and Hasanpur, Hosain gives a wide profile of diverse views and voices to account for the heterogeneity of her community. While the older women members like Laila's purdah observing aunts, Abida and Majida are unmoved by the happenings of the larger world and the various debates surrounding it, her cousin Zahra is entirely devoid of any political consciousness or ideological conviction. She is complacently opportunistic and unquestioning. She changes with situations opportunistically transforming herself from a purdah observing, traditional Muslim girl to a much-travelled woman attending parties in modern fineries, aligning herself with the interests of her politically ambitious husband, Naseer. Laila's religiously zealous friend Nadira considers partition and the creation of Pakistan to be an idealistic victory. The novel also critiques the elite members of the community for their complicity in the colonial domination of the British and their insensitivity to the lower-class members of their own community. Perhaps the most significant criticism of nationalism is voiced by one of the minor characters from the community, Zainab's elder brother, when Laila visits the impoverished village residence of one of their tenants:

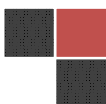
"What difference does anything make? Look around this village. The people rotted under the rulers of our own race, as they do under the English and as they will do if we rule ourselves again..." (Hosain102)

In the midst of the jamboree of stances under the same roof, Laila refuses to stand by any homogenizing political narrative because after closely witnessing political machinations on the ground level she observes:

"It was as...a gigantic game of chess or some mathematical problem of permutations and combinations. There was no political passion, only an implacable wish for power" (Hosain 225).

She is equally cynical about the apparently better contemporary democratic politics: "Nonsense! They merely use slogans and appeal to the lowest instincts-- to fear and fanaticism" (Hosain 245). Elsewhere Hosain shows how patriarchy remains unaffected by the hasty imposition of democracy as an abstraction from the above in India. While assisting women during the provincial elections in the aftermath of The Government of India Act (1935) Laila relates to her former classmate who had come to cast her vote when she says:

"I think I'll go home. Nothing is happening and it doesn't matter anyway. Everything will be decided by the men. I came only because I was asked To" (Hosain 257).



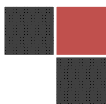
And another common voter, Rani Sahiba on being explained about what she is required to do, blurts out helplessly: "Vote? I do not understand. And I cannot read, Manager Sahib knows" (Hosain 258).

Hosain also displays how both the narratives of Muslim anti-colonialism and Western modernity as embodied by the patriarchs of Laila's family, Syed Mohammed Hasan or Baba Jan and Hamid, effectively subordinate and silence the women in the family. During his lifetime, Laila's traditional grandfather, Baba Jan demands absolute obedience from his female dependents, his westernized son Hamid is the 'new patriarch' who allows women to come out of purdah and receive modern education but is just as dictatorial and dismissive with them. In the event of a confrontation of differing political stances regarding nationalism between Laila and her uncle, he clearly makes his position as a guardian-controller clear:

"I respect an independent mind, but while you are in my charge and until I consider you are fit, you will be guided by me. I will not allow any action of which I disapprove" (Hosain 160).

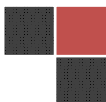
Not just about his young niece but he behaves similarly with his wife Saira as well. When she questions whether they should invite a particular acquaintance, lawyer Waliuddin after knowing that he had manipulated a riot between Shias and Sunnis, Hamid orders her to invite saying "I am not concerned with his methods. All I am concerned with are the results" (Hosain 177). Men and women of either the Muslim or the Hindu community are shown to be still unable to marry out of their own volition, on the basis of love across class or religious affiliations. While Saleem and Nadeera are the lucky two who face only mild displeasure because of their similar backgrounds, Laila and Ameer face severe opposition because of Ameer's unmatched lineage and wealth. Even the thought of a love-marriage is akin to blasphemy. Love ends in bitterness in case of Sita and Kemal for their religious differences. Since communities are solidified through marriages, controlling the marital 'choices' of the people are shown to be essential in the making of a national community.

Nayantara Sahgal's *Rich Like Us* interrogates the dichotomy between the private world of the 'home' and the public world of the nation and shows how it leads to uneven power distribution between men and women thereby leading to silencing and repressing of the woman. *Rich Like Us* recounts the experiences of Sonali, a public servant and others by repeatedly shifting between past and present. The narrative goes to and from between colonial pre-Independence India and the present political emergency to trace the trajectory of an elite Indian business family through the freedom struggle, post-Independence Indian politics right up to the 1970s. Sahgal depicts how the decline in the national political culture is prefigured in the personal space of its inhabitants. Her novel brings to our attention how the personal and the political constantly overlap such that there is no clear way of determining which precedes the other. Both Ram and Dev are exploitative and self-centered in their personal relationships as well as in their conducts in the larger public sphere. When Ram Surya, the well-connected and established garment-business owner meets Rose on one of his business trips to England, he smoothly talks his way into the heart of the lower-class English woman to an extent that his tactfully-delayed revelation of his married status and fatherhood, fails to alter Rose's feelings for him. In fact, he manipulates her into receiving the vital information about his background as a mere matter of fact that can be pushed aside as his religion allows him to have more than one lover or wife. In the process, Ram's first wife, Mona's feelings are



completely disregarded by him as he does not even bother to inform her about his newfound affair until he brings Rose to India to stay with her under the same roof with Mona and her newborn child. He justifies his actions by nonchalantly saying that “Lord Krishna had three hundred [wives]” (Sahgal 63). He cites the Hindu family law where marriage is a sacred unbreakable bond and family, a legal entity united by flesh and blood such as father and son must reside together. When Rose objects to such a cruel settlement as Ram was forcing all of them to be in, he gives numerous examples from culturally esteemed legends and myths to show that even if marriage is a sacred bond, it is normal to have more than one spouse. He cites examples like Krishna, Draupadi and King Dasrath to drive home his point about the validity of polygamy (Sahgal 63). Ram’s cruel and adulterous actions are socio-culturally sanctioned through law, custom, religion and mythology as an expression of “human behaviour in the raw” (Sahgal 64). While (Hindu) nationalism implied a valourization of certain long-established traditions derived from cultural myths, there is no concern about how such practices or interpretations are discriminatory or exploitative of Indian women. This is what is depicted through the condition and treatment of Mona and Rose as illustrated in the narrative.

Rose as a British woman and a second wife of Ram does her level best to be a part of the Indian marital household but she is perpetually at the precarious margins. Ram’s father initially does not even want to see her face, Mona regards her as the cause of all her troubles and the other members also do not give her any importance firstly because she is from a foreign lower-class background and secondly because she has not mothered a legitimate heir as Mona has done. Rose, despite all the alienation in a foreign culture and land, stays on desperately trying to make it as much of her home as her own country and family had been, for the sake of her emotional dependence on Ram. Woolf’s implication of women being without a nation is relevant here. By the virtue of Rose’s bond or marriage with Ram, her ‘home’ goes beyond the country of her origin, England. India is no less her own country. This is expressed as she eventually forges friendships with both Mona and Sonali and saves them from emotional distraught. As much as she is scared for her own security amid the anti-British uprising before Independence, she remains non-affiliated to her British background during the freedom struggle and stays on in India despite the turbulence and indifference and hostility shown to her by her adopted family. She is also sharply critical about the (mal) practices amidst the national Emergency imposed by the contemporary Prime Minister. Rose being a British woman at a time when India is struggling to get freedom from the British colonial masters, should theoretically be more powerful yet she remains as the perpetual ‘other’, as an outsider-insider, who is finally pushed out from even that narrow margin when her humane voice against the corruption and cruelty practiced by the elite members of Independent India gets too loud for their good. For both Mona and Rose, the political events encountered by the new nation are irrelevant. Their fates and lives are dictated by the socio-cultural customs that have inscribed their roles to the domestic sphere where they are under a whimsical and thoughtless patriarchal hegemony. It is, however, the very political events that allow such actions to get committed against them. Rose’s murder gets conveniently hushed during the emergency; the cause of Mona’s predicament goes unpunished as ‘her’ nation had ‘greater concerns’ to worry about than what its laws, customs and tradition might mean for the countrywomen. Just as insensitive and callous Ram is towards his familial responsibilities, so is he as a businessman, motivated more by profits than principles. He fails to live up to the legacy of his father *Lalaji*, who had a different and people-centric outlook regarding business.

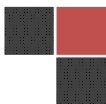


Also, where bringing up a child and adolescent is considered to be a domestic or personal concern, Sahgal shows how it has a direct bearing on the nation's larger public world. Ram's son Dev is pampered and catered to as the only male heir of the family by Ram and Mona. His misdeeds as a teenager are overlooked; the influential adults around him, mainly his father are overindulgent and careless about the integrity of relationships. Hence, Dev is shown to grow up to be an entitled, thoughtless, oppressive and exploitative citizen of the country. When this citizen gains enough political leverage due to the emergency, he wreaks havoc and does not even hesitate from committing fraudulent actions of forging his father's signature to withdraw funds from his account illegally. He is even more ruthless to Nishi, his wife and her father and goes to the extent of having her stepmother Rose murdered to conceal his corrupt actions.

Notable psychiatrist Frantz Fanon has observed how at the end of the colonial regime, the native elite bourgeoisie takes the position of the colonial leaders and perpetuates the same kind of oppression and exploitation upon the native population for the profits of its own class (Fanon 154). Sahgal's narrative traces this showing how the vision of the nation's liberators like Gandhi and Nehru had been distorted to advance the interests of the national elite during the emergency. Ben-Yishai and Bar-Yosef cite Emma Tarlo while stating that the Emergency, according to "the official narrative propagated...by Indira Gandhi, her son Sanjay Gandhi and numerous politicians, bureaucrats and journalists", was a necessity for India's smooth transition to modernity (Ben-Yishai and Bar-Yosef 164). Sahgal's novel "...positions itself against the decline both of democracy and of economic self-reliance that was a crucial principle of the early postcolonial decades" (Jani 174). Sonali criticizes the emergency as a move to secure gains for elite capitalists like Dev who view it as very good for business and who can get away with forgery and scam to fund their business. Rose, with her working-class wisdom, questions the cruelty that the state metes out to not just political dissenters but also to the most vulnerable and innocent citizens of the country.

The invisible and all-powerful presence of the female prime minister in *Rich Like Us* defies a simplistic or reductionist understanding of patriarchy. Yuval Davis argues that "women's oppression is endemic and integral to social relations with regard to the distribution of power and material resources in the society" (Yuval-Davis 18). Hence it is perfectly possible to have a woman who is simultaneously emancipated, educated and patriarchal. This explains the complicity of women like Zahra and Saira. Sahgal's depiction shows how the patriarchal system of separate significations that nationalism dealt out to the two genders, as explained by Chatterjee, does not get violated by women's presence even in the masculine public space. Women's assumption of the masculine role of administering the nation fits into the realm of their social responsibility to uphold and represent the sovereign national culture (Chatterjee 629). The overarching presence of the invisible fourth woman, the Indian Prime Minister who is responsible for ushering in of the dictatorial regime, within the same narrative space fulfils the analysis of the 'new patriarchy'.

Historian Shekhar Bandhopadhyay has said "...if mainstream nationalism assumed the existence of a homogenous nation that supposedly spoke with one voice, there have been persistent claims about exclusion, silences and suppression of discordant voices, such as that of the women or Dalits" (Bandyopadhyay 190). Hosain and Sahgal illustrate these "discordant voices" through the trajectories of conscious and sensitive individuals, Laila and Sonali who find themselves alienated and incapacitated from



influencing the broader narratives of the nation whether it is during the freedom struggle, the partition or the post-Independence emergency. Sonali permanently leaves her job with the civil service in order to devote her time to research about the nation's past and history. Hosain, through Laila's reminiscences, shows how the partition was a violent result of divisive politics that wrenched families apart, evicted thousands from their homes and turned the country's social fabric which could be otherwise potentially syncretic into one of volatility and suspicion. The protagonist-narrator of *Sunlight on a Broken Column*, Laila comes across as non-committing and skeptical of anyone unifying narrative. As the country moves into Independence, Laila observes of the people who were earlier complicit with colonialism and rarely looked beyond personal gain: "It appeared at times that neo-Indians wore their nationalism like a mask and their Indianness like fancy dress" (Hosain 276) She refers to citizens of post-Independence India as 'neo-Indians' to mark their opportunist or hypocritical attitudes in the guise of nationalism which became apparent only after they became more powerful in post-colonial India. Sahgal's Sonali resorts to an individual's path of gathering knowledge, seeking personal redemption through isolated acts of kindness. Hosain's Laila on the other hand, after her journey through the memory lane on her last visit to the now sold and dilapidated 'Ashiyan', comes to a sort of reconciliation with the inevitabilities of time and history. Both make an attempt to step towards the future, at the respective points of Indian history, with a note of positive acceptance.

"Narration, like nationalism, involves, the selection of certain ideas, events, experiences, people that are treated as necessary for the particular projects of a given narrative /nationalism" (Needham 99). Hosain and Sahgal, through their fictional narratives give space to a wider or an alternative range of experiences and opinions of a heterogeneous cast of characters caught in the process of nation-building. Their voices contribute towards illustrating a more layered and complex portrait of the nation and nationalism. The study's effort to re-read these novels is more relevant today as attempts to reconstitute the definition of the nation and what constitutes nationalism continue to this day.

Notes:

¹The phrase is derived or inspired by the book dealing with theory and practice in postcolonial literature, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Postcolonial Literatures* by Bill Ashcroft et al.

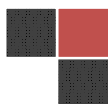
²The edition/impression of Attia Hosain's *Sunlight on a Broken Column* that has been followed for this study was published in 2009.

³The 9th impression of Nayantara Sahgal's *Rich Like Us* has been followed for this study. It was published in 2017.

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