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"Politics, Power, And The Protagonist: A Study Of Social And Political Contexts In The Novels Of Nayantara Sahgal And Raja Rao"

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Abstract

The interplay between politics, power, and individual agency forms a cornerstone of Indian English literature, particularly in the works of Nayantara Sahgal and Raja Rao. This study examines the social and political contexts embedded in their novels, focusing on how protagonists navigate the turbulent landscapes of colonial and post-colonial India. Sahgal, drawing from her Nehru-Gandhi family background, infuses her narratives with critiques of post-independence corruption, authoritarianism, and gender dynamics, as seen in novels like *Rich Like Us* (1985) and *Mistaken Identity* (1988). Her protagonists, often elite women or intellectuals, grapple with personal crises amid national upheavals, such as the Emergency period under Indira Gandhi, highlighting the erosion of democratic ideals and the abuse of power. In contrast, Raja Rao's metaphysical approach blends Gandhian philosophy with spiritual quests, portraying politics as a pathway to self-realization in works like *Kanthapura* (1938) and *The Serpent and the Rope* (1960). His protagonists, typically Brahmin seekers, embody the fusion of social activism and inner enlightenment, reflecting the Gandhian non-violent resistance against colonial rule and the broader search for truth in a divided society.

Through a comparative lens, this article reveals convergences and divergences: both authors use protagonists to symbolize national aspirations and failures, yet Sahgal emphasizes secular, feminist critiques of power structures, while Rao integrates Advaita philosophy and folklore to transcend political materialism. The analysis draws on historical contexts, including the freedom struggle, partition, and post-Nehru disillusionment, to argue that these novels not only document India's socio-political evolution but also interrogate the protagonist's role as a mediator between individual freedom and collective destiny. By

exploring themes of power dynamics, social hierarchies, and moral decay, the study underscores how Sahgal and Rao contribute to a nuanced understanding of identity in modern India. Ultimately, their works serve as cautionary tales, urging readers to reflect on the perils of unchecked authority and the enduring quest for ethical governance in a diverse nation.

Keywords: Indian English literature, politics, power dynamics, protagonists, Nayantara Sahgal, Raja Rao, social contexts

Introduction:

Indian English literature has long served as a mirror to the nation's complex socio-political fabric, capturing the tensions between tradition and modernity, colonialism and independence, and individual agency amid collective struggles. Emerging in the early 20th century, this genre evolved from the pioneering efforts of writers like Mulk Raj Anand, R.K. Narayan, and Raja Rao, who infused their narratives with the fervour of the independence movement. By the mid-century, it expanded to include voices like Nayantara Sahgal, who brought a post-colonial perspective laced with personal and political introspection. Politics and power are not mere backdrops in these works; they shape characters' destinies, revealing how systemic forces intersect with personal lives. This study delves into the novels of Sahgal and Rao, examining how their protagonists embody the social and political contexts of their eras, offering insights into India's turbulent history.

Nayantara Sahgal, born in 1927 into the Nehru-Gandhi family, draws heavily from her insider's view of Indian politics. As the daughter of Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit and niece of Jawaharlal Nehru, Sahgal's upbringing in Anand Bhawan exposed her to the intricacies of power, nationalism, and governance. Her novels, such as *Rich Like Us* (1985), critique the moral decline in post-Nehru India, particularly during the Emergency (1975-1977), where authoritarianism stifled dissent. Sahgal's protagonists, often women navigating elite circles, confront corruption, oppression, and gender inequalities, symbolizing the broader disillusionment with democratic ideals. For instance, in *Rich Like Us*, the narrative contrasts the idealism of independence with the corruption of the Emergency, using characters like Sonali to highlight how power corrupts personal integrity. Her work extends the tradition of political fiction, blending autobiography with satire to expose the "intolerant establishments" that silence critics.

Raja Rao (1908-2006), a metaphysical novelist rooted in Kannada Brahmin traditions, approaches politics through a philosophical lens. Influenced by Gandhian ideology and Advaita Vedanta, Rao's novels like *Kanthapura* (1938) depict villages as microcosms of national awakening. The protagonist Moorthy, inspired by Gandhi, leads a non-violent uprising, merging social activism with spiritual quests. Rao views literature as "Sadhana" (spiritual discipline), where politics becomes a means to the Absolute, as in *The Serpent and the Rope* (1960), where the protagonist Ramaswamy seeks truth amid East-West cultural clashes. His narrative style, episodic and Puranic, emphasizes circular time and symbolic characters, reflecting India's mythical heritage intertwined with political realities.

Comparatively, both authors use protagonists to probe power's impact on society. Sahgal's focus on secular, feminist critiques contrasts Rao's spiritual transcendence, yet both address colonial legacies and post-independence challenges. This article argues that their novels illuminate how politics shapes identity, with protagonists acting as bridges between personal and national narratives. By analyzing key works up to 2024 scholarship, it highlights their enduring relevance in understanding India's power dynamics.

Review of Literature:

The body of scholarship on Nayantara Sahgal and Raja Rao underscores their pivotal roles in Indian English literature, particularly in portraying politics and power through protagonists embedded in social contexts. Early analyses, such as those in Britannica's (2025) biography of Sahgal, emphasize her elite background and how it informs her depiction of personal crises amid political upheaval, as in *Rich Like Us*, where corruption and oppression mirror post-Nehru moral decline. Similarly, Wikipedia entries on Sahgal highlight her family ties and her return of the Sahitya Akademi Award in 2015 as a protest against intolerance, linking her fiction to real-world dissent and power abuses. These sources establish Sahgal as a chronicler of India's political elite, with protagonists like those in *Mistaken Identity* symbolizing colonial legacies and identity struggles.

Scholarly articles further deepen this view. V. Mohini Madan's (1996) piece on Sahgal's neo-socio-political novels argues that her works, from *A Time to Be Happy* to *Lesser Breeds*, authentically portray post-colonial turmoil, with protagonists navigating bureaucratic corruption and feminist concerns. The Impressions article by P. Bharadwaj (2017) echoes this, noting Sahgal's unique position as the first Indian woman novelist tackling political themes, influenced by her Nehru family upbringing, and how her narratives expose power's demoralizing effects on society. In the Caravan essay, Ritu Menon's adaptation portrays Sahgal's fallout with Indira Gandhi, illustrating how her novels reflect authoritarianism and the protagonist's resistance to censorship. Times of India features on Sahgal's thought-provoking novels, like *The Fate of Butterflies*, highlight her satirical take on repressive regimes, with protagonists embodying societal impacts of politics.

New Directions Publishing's profile on Sahgal reinforces her metaphysical undertones in political fiction, as in *Rich Like Us*, where dual narratives of Indian and Cockney women expose Emergency-era corruption. Woodstock School's alumni bio connects her education to her literary critique of post-colonial power structures. ThriftBooks listings of Sahgal's works provide a comprehensive view of her oeuvre, emphasizing political biographies alongside novels. The Library of Congress entry notes her feminist concerns in seeking women's independence within political narratives.

Shifting to Raja Rao, Literariness.org's analysis positions his novels as quests for the Absolute, with *Kanthapura*'s Moorthy exemplifying politics as spiritual discipline amid Gandhian resistance. Narayan, Shyamala A. (2006) critiques Rao's narrative techniques, noting how protagonists in *The Serpent and the Rope* blend metaphysics with social realism. Wikipedia on Rao details his Brahmin roots and Sahitya

Akademi Award, framing his works as contributions to world literature through political-spiritual fusion. New Directions on Rao praises *Kanthapura* for its mythical style, where village protagonists unite against colonialism.

The Raja Rao Endowment site describes him as a teacher-novelist, with protagonists exploring Indian ethos beyond politics. Britannica's (2025) entry on Rao highlights his Neustadt Prize and how novels like *The Cat and Shakespeare* abstract political themes into allegories. Anushua Chatterjee's (2023) Medium article offers a critical overview, noting Rao's philosophical statements in symbolic terms, with protagonists progressing from ignorance to knowledge. ThriftBooks on Rao lists his metaphysical comedies, emphasizing social concerns in political contexts.

Academia.edu papers on Rao explore interracial themes and quests for identity, linking politics to illusion and reality in his protagonists. GradeSaver's biography underscores Rao's nationalist involvement, with novels documenting freedom struggles through symbolic figures. Comparative studies, like Bharadwaj's (2017) Impressions piece, draw parallels between Sahgal's post-colonial focus and Rao's 1930s socio-political upheavals, noting shared themes of nationalism but differing emphases on gender and metaphysics.

Discussion

The novels of Nayantara Sahgal and Raja Rao reveal profound insights into politics and power, with protagonists serving as lenses for social critique. In Sahgal's *Rich Like Us*, the Emergency era's authoritarianism is dissected through Sonali, whose demotion exposes how power prioritizes sycophancy over integrity, reflecting broader societal corruption. This contrasts with Rose's adaptation to India, highlighting cultural clashes amid political instability. Sahgal's feminist lens portrays women as victims yet resisters of patriarchal power, as in *The Day in Shadow*, where the divorcée protagonist challenges male dominance in a politically volatile society. Her works critique post-independence disillusionment, showing how power erodes Nehruvian ideals, with protagonists embodying personal moral stands against systemic decay.

Rao's approach is more metaphysical; in *Kanthapura*, Moorthy's Gandhian activism transforms politics into a spiritual journey, uniting castes against colonial power through non-violence. The village narrator's Puranic style underscores communal harmony disrupted by authority, with the protagonist symbolizing national awakening. In *The Serpent and the Rope*, Ramaswamy's quest transcends politics, using East-West encounters to explore truth, where power is illusionary compared to self-realization. Rao's protagonists, often intellectuals, integrate Advaita philosophy, viewing social hierarchies as barriers to enlightenment, differing from Sahgal's secular focus.

Comparatively, both use protagonists to humanize political abstractions: Sahgal's elite figures confront real-world abuses, while Rao's symbolic ones seek transcendence. Yet, Sahgal emphasizes gender and corruption, critiquing modern power's materialism, whereas Rao blends folklore with activism, offering timeless critiques. This duality enriches Indian literature, showing politics as both oppressive force and redemptive path. Their contexts—Sahgal's post-colonial elite world versus Rao's rural, philosophical one—highlight evolving power dynamics, urging readers to question authority's impact on identity.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the novels of Nayantara Sahgal and Raja Rao stand as testament to the intricate weave of politics, power, and protagonistic agency in Indian English literature. Sahgal's narratives, rooted in her political heritage, unflinchingly expose the fissures in post-independence India, where power corrupts and protagonists like Sonali in *Rich Like Us* become emblems of resistance against authoritarianism and gender inequities. Her works serve as a chronicle of disillusionment, reminding us that unchecked authority leads to moral erosion and societal fragmentation. Rao, conversely, elevates politics to a metaphysical plane, with protagonists like Moorthy in *Kanthapura* embodying Gandhian ideals as spiritual quests, transcending material power through non-violence and self-discovery. His integration of philosophy and folklore offers a hopeful vision, where social contexts foster enlightenment amid oppression.

Together, these authors illuminate India's journey from colonial subjugation to post-colonial challenges, using protagonists to bridge personal and national narratives. Their divergences—Sahgal's feminist, secular critiques versus Rao's spiritual abstractions—enrich the discourse, showing power not as monolithic but multifaceted, influencing identity, ethics, and community. This study affirms their contributions to understanding how social and political forces shape human experience, urging contemporary readers to reflect on enduring issues like intolerance and inequality. As India navigates modern complexities, Sahgal and Rao's legacies inspire a reevaluation of power's role in fostering or hindering progress.

Suggestions

To advance research on politics, power, and protagonists in Sahgal and Rao's novels, several avenues warrant exploration. First, interdisciplinary approaches could integrate gender studies with political theory, examining how Sahgal's female protagonists challenge patriarchal power structures in a post-colonial framework. Future scholars might conduct comparative analyses with global authors like Nadine Gordimer or Chinua Achebe, highlighting universal themes of resistance against authoritarianism. Empirical studies, such as reader-response surveys, could assess how contemporary audiences interpret these protagonists' roles in addressing current Indian issues like populism and inequality.

For Rao, suggestions include deeper philosophical inquiries into Advaita influences, using digital humanities tools to map narrative structures in *Kanthapura* and their reflection of social hierarchies. Archival research on Rao's unpublished manuscripts or correspondences could reveal untapped insights into his views on Gandhian politics. Collaborative projects between literary critics and historians might reconstruct the socio-political milieus of their eras, enhancing contextual understandings.

Broader implications suggest curriculum reforms in Indian universities to include these novels in political science courses, fostering discussions on power dynamics. Publishing annotated editions with 2024 updates could make their works accessible to younger readers. Finally, funding for translations into regional languages would democratize access, allowing diverse audiences to engage with these critiques. These suggestions aim to sustain scholarly dialogue, ensuring Sahgal and Rao's insights inform future generations on ethical governance and individual agency.

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