

PRESENTATION OF HORRENDOUS EMERGENCY IN ROHINTON MISTRY'S *A FINE BALANCE*

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Abstract

This Paper is an attempt to explore the horrors of the Emergency depicted in Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance*. Published in 1995, the novel is set against the socio-political crisis of India during the Emergency era. The declaration of Emergency by Indira Gandhi is exposed as a means to retain her political power. The novel recounts the lives and struggles of four main characters- Dina Dalal, a Parsi widow, Maneck Kohla, a Parsi Student, and two Chammar turned tailors, Ishvar Darji and Omprakash Darji. The novel opens with a prologue in 1975, in which the lower-caste tailors Ishvar and Om meet Maneck Kohla on the train during their journeys to Dina's flat for different purposes. During the troubled times of the Emergency, these four characters live together in Dina's flat and support each other to fulfill their dreams. Besides their constant efforts and struggles, they are exploited and tortured by the crazy laws of the Emergency. Suspension of fundamental rights, force eviction of slum and pavement dwellers, force labour camps, force sterilization, custodial tortures and murders, prohibition of any form of protests, etc., which had occurred during those turbulent years, are realistically presented by Mistry in the novel. The novel highlights the erosion of Indian democracy during Mrs. Indira Gandhi's reign, exploring the plight of the Indian masses during those tumultuous years. The excesses of the Emergency are narrated from the perspectives of the victims. In fact, the novel vividly records the breakdown of law and order and the uncertainty of human lives during the Emergency.

Key Words: Crumbling, Democracy, Emergency, Sterilisation, Chammar, Tumultuous, Horror.

Rohinton Mistry has emerged as a great Indian novelist during the last decade of the twentieth century. His first book, *Tales from Frojshaa Baag*, a collection of eleven interrelated stories, was published in 1987, and after a gap of three years, he published his debut novel, *Such a Long Journey*, in 1991 and won many prestigious awards and recognitions. His most voluminous work *A Fine Balance* was published in 1995, and it also bagged him a number of awards. His third novel, *Family Matters*, was published in 2002, and just like his other works, the novel also got several awards. So far, all three novels have been nominated for the Prestigious Booker Prize. His latest book, *The Scream*, a single short story, came out in 2006. Though not a prolific writer, Rohinton Mistry is considered one of the outstanding Parsi novelists who has broadened the horizon of Indian writing in English.

In this paper, an attempt is made to discuss the horrors of Emergency revealed in Rohinton Mistry's second novel, *A Fine Balance*. Set during the gloomy period of Emergency, the novel narrates the sordid picture Emergency era, during which all the fundamental freedoms of the citizens of India were suspended. Mistry is among the few Indian novelists to deal extensively with the horrors Emergency. Closely observed, the novel can be categorized as a political novel. Regarding the treatment of political events of post-independence India in his novel, Mistry in an interview admits: "It seemed to me that 1975, the year of Emergency would be the next important year, if one was preparing a list of important dates in Indian history" (qtd. in Bharucha 2007: 44). The novel explores Indian socio-political reality from 1975 to 1984, narrating the untold sufferings of the common people during those years. In the novel, Mistry incorporates the contrasting lives of the Parsis and the lower caste untouchables from rural India, showcasing the impact of the socio-political and economic turmoils on the lives of the ordinary people. The novel opens on the exact day of the declaration of Emergency in 1975. At the beginning of the story, Ishvar and Om, the Chammar-turned-tailors from rural India, and Maneck Kohla, a Parsi student from

the mountains, coincidentally met on a train in their Journeys to Dina's flat in Mumbai. Dina Dalal is a Parsi widow who is constantly fighting for her self-independence. While Maneck is moving into Dina's apartment as a paying guest, the two tailors are arriving to assist her with her tailoring tasks. These four protagonists are making every effort to fulfill their dreams during the awful years of Emergency, but the excesses of Emergency shatter all of their hopes and ambitions.

The excesses of politicians, corruption, detention without trial, forced labor, custodial murders, and all the tortures inflicted upon the common people during the Emergency are all realistically depicted in the novel. By portraying the brutal period from the victims' point of view, Mistry reveals the covert political manipulations carried out by politicians and higher authorities under Indira Gandhi's direction. All four of the main characters in the novel suffer extremely as a result of the absurd Emergency rules. Through their lives and challenges, "we live the trauma and excesses of the time: MISA, censorship, police brutality, and custody deaths(Pandya 2001: 185). The novel is a recreation of the horrible circumstances under which the Indian masses suffered their lives during that period, challenging the official versions that tried to enshroud them. Ramesh K. Mishra rightly asserts: "Mistry's deft handling of Internal Emergency during 1975-1977 provides a vivid and graphic picture of the turbulent times when most of the parliamentary opposition, along with thousands of trade unionists, students, and social workers were put behind bars to enable Indira Gandhi to retain her power" (2001:189). In the narrative, just like other apolitical Parsis, Dina is of the view that Emergency is "government problems- games played by people in power. It doesn't affect ordinary people like us" (*AFB*: 75). But on the contrary, their lives and expectations are deeply affected by the inhuman laws of emergency. During those years, common people were the worst sufferers. Though Emergency is supported by well-to-do persons like Mrs. Gupta and Nusswan, Dina's brother, in the hope that "they could squeeze more out of their labour, it was a kind of licence to exploit the underdog" (Tripathi 2001:217), but the majority of the characters are against Indira's decision. Along the narrative, Mrs. Gupta Praises Indira Gandhi as an able leader for her bold decision. She also blames the opposition leader, Jay Prakash Narayan, for revolting against Indira's proclamation of Emergency. She says: "especially these days, with so much trouble in the country and leaders like Jay Prakash Narayan encouraging Civil Disobedience. Simply at all creating problems. Thinks he is Mahatma Gandhi the second"(*AFB*: 65). Indira Gandhi's cunning motive is unmasked when Dina expresses her view that Indira Gandhi declared the Emergency to retain her position as "the court found her guilty of cheating in the election"(73). Mrs. Gupta refutes the claim by saying, "that's all rubbish, it will be appealed. Now all the troublemakers who accused her family have been put in jail. No more strikes and morchas and silly disturbances.(73). Through their conversations, Mistry attacks Indira Gandhi's selfish nature. Dina's calculative brother Nusswan also speaks in favour of the Emergency:

Punctuality has been restored to the railway system. And as my director friend was saying, there is also a great improvement in industrial relations. Nowadays he can call the police in just one second, to take away the Union troublemakers. A few good saltings at the police station, and they are soft as butter. My friend says production has improved tremendously. And who benefits from all this? The workers, The common people. Even the World Bank and the IMF approve of the change. Now they are offering more loans.

Through the satirical portrayal of the industrialists and business executives like Nusswan and Mrs. Gupta, Mistry tries to reveal that the colonial legacy of exploiting the helpless by the powerful still continues in independent India. K. Ratna Shiela Mani opines that, “Mistry is unrelenting in his satiric portrayal of those who supported, legitimized and performed Emergency’s horrors, where everything is upside down and black can be made into white and day turned into night”(2001: 202). Mistry’s sympathy for the poor and the downtrodden people is well documented in the narrative. In the narrative, Ishvar and Om Prakash are the worst affected. A comprehensive breakdown of India's social, political, and economic systems during that era is revealed. Through the suffering of Ishvar and Om, Mistry vividly narrates the extent to which the impoverished and the oppressed are crushed. They become the victims of City Beautification Programmes, forced labour camps, forced sterilization, the initiatives taken up by Sanjay Gandhi during the Emergency, under the false pretext of developing the nation, which exploits the helpless. They are also the victims of caste violence in their village, and they have come to the city for a better future, but, on the contrary, they are stripped of their rights and tortured, betrayed, and marginalised. Under the City Beautification Programme, their shack in the slum is demolished, and they become homeless and spend their nights on the pavement. After spending some nights on the pavement, they are forcibly picked up by the police and brought to a construction site where the forced labourers are made to work without proper basic amenities. The novel's depiction of the cruel treatment of the laborers in the work camp illustrates what happens to the weak and impoverished under a despotic regime.

In the work camp, Ishvar and Om endured much suffering. They continued to strive for a better life, but the instability of society and politics took advantage of them. The life challenges of these characters dramatically depict the loss of human values and uncertainty in all facets of life brought about by the corruption and criminalization of politics, which were common in Indian society during those years. Ishvar and Om, along with Shanker, the beggar, were taken out of that horrible place by the Beggarmaster under the condition that the two tailors would have to pay a certain sum of money to the Beggarmaster. Though an emergency is declared on the false pretext of protecting the internal security of the nation, the government is encouraging the industrialists, black marketeers, and corrupt officials to flourish, thereby exploiting the poor and the needy. Mistry also exposes how Indira befooled the nation, and this is clearly shown when Congress workers try to persuade the poor people in the slums to join a public meeting organize by the Congress Party by saying that: “The Prime Minister’s message is that she is your servant, and wants to help you. She wants to hear about things from your own lips”(AFB: 258). After knowing the intentions of the slum dwellers, the party workers forcibly take them to the meeting spot where a large crowd is gathered, and through this scene, Mistry showcases how the then Prime Minister gives speeches to save her image. Indira Gandhi’s hypocrisy is slammed by the author. The framing of the Twenty-Point Programmes only to cover up her selfish and corrupt nature is criticized by presenting the unfulfilled promises made by her:

What we want to do is provide homes for the people. Enough food, so no one goes hungry. Cloth at controlled prices. We want to build schools for our children and hospitals to look after the sick. Birth control will also be available to everyone. And the government will no longer tolerate a situation where people increase the population recklessly, draining the resources that belong to all. We promise that we will eliminate poverty from our cities and towns and villages.

The government's failure to keep their promises is ruthlessly criticized by Mistry in the text. During the turbulent years of the Emergency, the government silenced the voices of the common people. Everything collapsed and worsened. The reality was quite a contrast to what the government had promised to be. The government's inability to protect and uplift the lives of the common people is realistically presented through the challenges of Ishvar, Om, Rajaram, the Monkey man, and thousands of helpless beggars who roam the streets of the city. The Congress government under the leadership of Indira Gandhi is portrayed as an irresponsible and dictatorial government that consists of crooks, hypocrites, and criminal-minded politicians who are constantly harassing the helpless ordinary people. With the application of many black laws, Indira Gandhi misused her political power and devastated the nation. Her power-hungry attitude deeply hurt the feelings of the Indian masses. With the help of MISA, any person could be arrested without proper evidence. There was complete anarchy and chaos. Murders, suicide, detention without trials, etc., had become the order of the day. In the narrative, Nawaz, who helped Ishvar and Omprakash during their difficult times, was arrested on the pretext of gold smuggling without proper evidence due to the influence of his enemy. Rohinton Mistry reveals this appalling situation through the tea stall owner near Nawaz's residence, when he says: "With Emergency, everything is upside-down. Black can be made white, day turned into night. With the right influence and a little cash, sending people to jail is very easy. There is even a new law called MISA to simplify the whole procedure (*AFB*: 299).

Most of the characters in the novel are directly or indirectly hit by the socio-political instability during the Emergency period. The harsh laws of the Emergency continuously take advantage of them despite their unwavering efforts to find security and tranquility in a turbulent nation. Ishvar and Om, being lower-class citizens, are unable to escape the criminal-minded leaders' grasp and their subsequent attempts to crush the defenseless and impoverished. In the narrative, Mistry criticizes the Family Planning Programme launched by Sanjay Gandhi under the pretext of preventing unwanted population growth by pointing out the grave injustice done to the weakest section of Indian society. In order to achieve their target numbers, government officials are instructed to fill up their quotas unless they are promoted. This is clearly shown when an officer asks Ishvar for a vasectomy in exchange for a ration card. The government is exploiting its own people instead of helping them. The situation is very critical for the common people. When Ishvar and Om visit the small town where Ashraf Chacha lives to finalise Om's marriage, and during their stay in that town, they are shocked to see the rising power and status of Thakur Dharamsi, an upper caste monster who had ruined their family. Ashraf Chacha pacifies Om when he tries to take revenge on Thakur Dharamsi. He advises Om to stay away from that monster. Thakur Dharamsi's heightened power shows the nexus between the gangsters, criminals, police, and the politicians. There is a total breakdown of law and order, and everything is under the control of powerful gangsters like Thakur Dharamsi, who supported the illegal activities of the government. Instead of maintaining law and order, police take bribes, and they are threatening the lives of the innocent. The common people have no choice except to bear the pain silently. Regarding this terrible situation, Novy Kapadia asserts:

During the course of the narrative, without any authorial intrusions, Mistry sharply criticizes the Internal Emergency. He shows that all the avowed promises of the Emergency to abolish bonded labour, child labour, sati dowry system, child marriage and harassment of backward castes by upper castes never materialized. Instead as Mistry shows in several instances in the novel a nexus emerges between the police and the established hierarchy either the upper dominance in the villages or the

land/building mafia in Bombay.
 1998:129

In the narrative, Ishvar's cherished dream of starting a new chapter of their lives cannot be fulfilled as they are caught along with hundreds of people from the market by the security forces. Mistry realistically describes the heartwrenching scene of how ordinary people are forcibly picked up by the police for forced sterilization: "the police were snatching people at random. Old men, young boys, housewives with children were being dragged into the trucks. A few managed to escape, most were trapped like chickens in a coop, unable to do anything except to wait to be collected by law enforcers" (AFB:530). Ashraf Chacha also loses his life when he tries to intervene and help them to escape from the area but "the hospitals following the standing orders, put down the cause of death as accidental" (538). Both Ishvar and Om and other innocent people are forcibly brought to the place where Thakur Dharamsi and his associates organize a Nushbandhi Mela. Despite Ishvar's repeated pleadings to the doctor for sparing his nephew's vasectomy, both of them were put under the knife. Thakur Dharamsi, who is in charge of the Nushbandhi Mela, takes the opportunity to torture the Chammar-turned-tailors for deviating from the caste norms, and under his instruction, Om is castrated as well. After knowing his nephew's condition, Ishvar wept inconsolably, cursing the government: "what kind of life, what kind of country is this where we cannot come and go as we please? Is it a sin to visit my native place? To get my nephew married? (54).

The misuse of power by those who have contacts with the government and the higher authorities is exposed. The politicians supported the criminals for their personal gains. Regarding this, Novy Kapadia comments: "Thakur Dharamsi's misuse of authority shows that the trend of criminalization of politics and politicization of crimes, so rampant in India in the last decade of the twentieth century, started in the period of Internal Emergency" (1998:132). The silly games played by the government are seriously condemned by Mistry through various characters. The unsanitary conditions in which surgeons are compelled to execute the surgery are also graphically described in the novel. They are not allowed to uphold patient safety protocols. The administrator of the sterilization camp angrily shouts: Instruments are cleaned enough. How long do you want to heat the water? Efficiency is paramount in a Nushbandhi Mela, targets have to be fulfilled. Who is going to pay for so many cylinders? (AFB: 533). The cruelty of the Indira Gandhi-led Congress Government during the Emergency years is beyond imagination. Mistry's concern for the backward and the oppressed makes him criticize the government for its cruelty. Despite enduring so many hardships to get a better life, Ishvar and Om cannot achieve anything and they are reduced to beggars but they try to maintain a fine balance between hope and despair. Dina also returns to her brother's place as she is forcibly evicted from her flat. The cruel laws of Emergency snatch away all their dreams.

Along the narrative, Mistry showcases the impact of Emergency on the lives of the innocent and helpless. The harsh reality of post-independence India during and after the Emergency is graphically presented in the narrative. The narrative is full of horrors and traumas experienced by ordinary citizens during that period. Regarding Mistry's treatment of realism Silvia Albertazzi opines that the novel is "a tragic realistic epic, it seems to belong more to the XIX century season of realism and verism than to present day fiction (2004:83). During the Emergency, even the students were not spared. In the novel, Maneck's friend Avinash, who was the president of the student union of their college, becomes a victim of custodial murder. Quite contrary to Maneck, Avinash is well aware of the political games played by Indira Gandhi during the emergency years. Mistry unmasks Indira's selfish nature and the truth behind the declaration of Emergency through the mouthpiece of Avinash:

Three weeks ago, the High Court found the Prime Minister guilty of cheating in the last elections. So, the opposition parties, student organisations, trade unions- they started mass demonstrations across the country. All calling for her resignation. Then, to hold on to power, she claimed that the country's internal security was threatened by internal disturbances and declared a state of Emergency. (AFB:499)

Indira Gandhi is portrayed as a leader who took advantage of the lives of people who rebelled against her choices. Like many other student activists in the book, Avinash is on the run, and his slain body is discovered close to the railroad tracks. The horrific torture meted out to those who opposed the government was evident in his parents' account of the marks of torture on his body. Avinash's father says:

At last, after such a long time, we saw our son. We saw burns on many shameful parts of his body, and his mother picked up his hand to press to her forehead, we could see that his fingernails were gone. So we asked them in the morgue, how can this happen in falling from a train? They said that anything can happen. Nobody would help us. 499

Throughout the novel, Mistry is more concerned with narrating the plight of the ordinary people during Indira Gandhi's reign, especially during the Emergency years. In the epilogue, the narrative action is shifted towards the calamities caused by her death. Mistry shows a clear picture of the chaotic scenario of the nation after Indira Gandhi's brutal murder by her Sikh bodyguards. Through a Sikh character, Mistry reveals that Indira Gandhi lost her life due to her political games. At the end of the novel, Maneck ends his life, unable to deal with the appalling circumstances of post-independence India. The loss of humanity and exploitation of human rights during those turbulent years are vividly captured and presented in the novel. It is very appropriate to conclude with Shashi Tharoor's comments that "the novel is a stark and moving portrait of life during Emergency"(qtd. in Mishra 2001:188)

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