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Demystification of internal emergency in Rohinton Mistry's novel *A Fine Balance*

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Abstract

Literary creations of Rohinton Mistry's recall the works of Charles Dickens who with his magical writings explores the socio-political issues of the society. He endeavours to fish out the past in his writings. His novel, *A Fine Balance* throws light on the real motive behind the imposition of emergency. Although the reason as given by the government was the internal and external disturbances but the actual reason as shown by Mistry through his novel AFB was that Indira's own political career was at stake. Mistry unravels the sufferings and misery caused by the political upheavals that took place during the regime of Indira Gandhi. He portrays the horror and cruelty that was experienced by the people during that period. Like many of the sufferers of Emergency, the characters in Mistry's novel, *A Fine Balance* also have to face every trouble, every atrocity that is believed to be associated with that dark phase.

Keywords: Sterilisation, victimised, vasectomy, dark phase, disturbance, evacuation

Introduction

The period of Internal Emergency of 1975 is a blotch on the conscience of our country. It is one of the most controversial periods of Indian history since its independence. The Emergency in India was a 21-month period from 1975 to 1977 when Prime Minister Indira Gandhi had a state of emergency declared across the country. Officially issued by President Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed under Article 352 of the Constitution because of prevailing "internal disturbance", the Emergency was in effect from 25 June 1975 to its withdrawal on 21 March 1977. The order bestowed upon the Prime Minister the authority to rule by decree, allowing elections to be cancelled and civil liberties to be suspended. For much of the Emergency, most of Gandhi's political opponents were imprisoned and the press was censored. Several other human rights violations were reported from the time, including a mass campaign for vasectomy spearheaded by her son Sanjay Gandhi.

The final decision to impose an emergency was proposed by Indira Gandhi, agreed upon by the President of India, and ratified by the Cabinet and the Parliament from July to August 1975. It was based on the rationale that there were imminent internal and external threats to the Indian state.

In his writings Mistry adopts the realist mode and represents what was happening around in reality. The novel *A Fine Balance* (hereafter referred to as AFB), revolves around the story of four people who face the consequences of Emergency in direct or indirect way and become the victims of Emergency.

During Emergency, everything in India became topsy turvy and was in a state of jeopardy. The fundamental rights of the people were suspended and their liberties were curtailed. Even the press and media were not spared. A gag was imposed on press and media. Whosoever dared to go against the government or his plans was dealt with a heavy hand. A new law MISA was specially enacted to provide the government an unbridled power. This draconian law empowered the Government to arrest anybody at its free-will and imprison him/her without any trial. Mistry writes, "With the 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's even a new law called MISA, to simplify the whole procedure" (AFB 348).

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During Emergency Family Planning was made almost compulsory and the sterilized people were rewarded with gifts. The government sought the help of the officers to hunt down people. Mistry handles this situation quite artistically. While Ishvar and Om apply for a ration card, the officer urges them to do vasectomy. Nearly all the officers are in an unpleasant predicament as they are forced to produce more cases in order to remain secure in their jobs. One of the facilitator's comments, "You see, since the Emergency started, there's a new rule in the department-every officer has to encourage people to get sterilized. If he doesn't fill his quota, no promotion for him. What to do, poor fellow, he is also trapped, no?" (AFB 207).

Mistry points out clearly how Emergency empowered such mean fellows like Thakur Dharamsi to enjoy excessive and unbridled power. The in-charges of the Family Planning Schemes, either lured or forced poor people to go for vasectomy. By portraying characters like Thakur, Mistry draws the exact picture of the politicians of the period and their cruelty, with a touch of realism. Thakur Dharamsi threatens the poor people with dire consequences if they refuse to do family planning. He accumulates a lot of wealth from the funds allotted to family planning. The government ordered the stopping of salary of the government employees, who fail to produce at least two or three cases for sterilization. Dharamsi makes optimum use of this opportunity and invites the government employees to the clinic and bid for the hapless villagers to be vasectomised. The highest bidder could get the cases registered in his quota.

Beautification and Evacuation drive was also undertaken during Internal Emergency. As a result, thousands of slums comprising of shacks, shanties and makeshift dwellings were destroyed. Thousands of people were rendered homeless. The government officials carried out this mission in the garb of safety inspectors. They befooled the slum dwellers saying all that was being done to improve the condition of their houses. As the slum-dwellers came out, they found the bulldozers mercilessly demolishing their shacks and thereby leaving them homeless. Ishvar and Om are adversely affected due to the City Beautification Drive. Their huts are bulldozed to grounds. Hutoxi G. Wadia in "Shades of Indian modernity in the novels of Rohinton Mistry" compares their sad plight with the condition in Nazi's concentration camps during World War II." Mistry writes in A Fine Balance:

Their [Om and Ishvar's] shacks were destroyed and later they were picked up along with a hundred other pavement dwellers and beggars and dumped in a 'work camp' not unlike the Nazi concentration camps of the second world war.... The 17 years old boy is forcibly castrated and Ishvar loses both his legs thanks to the unsterilized surgical instruments used for his sterilization operation. (222).

Navalkar, and Thokaray who get rent for these houses, keep mum, because they are now the in charge of City Beautification Scheme. In the hope of getting shelter again in Nawaz's house, Ishvar and Om reach his house. But to their shock and surprise, they get to know about the arrest of Nawaz on the ground of gold-smuggling from Gulf. His real offence was not smuggling but was asking a rich customer for his payment. The rich and the mighty always rules the roost. During the Emergency, the laws favoured only the rich. Mistry points out the tendency of the high-class people through the characters, the landlord, Thakur Daramsi,

Sergeant, and others. He speaks about the hardships undergone by a Parsi woman during the black days of Emergency. Dina's landlord tortures her in several ways. He sends his men in order to evacuate her from the flat. The rent collector Ibrahim's comment denotes the helplessness of the poor: "These Emergency times are terrible, sister. Money can buy the necessary police order. Justice is sold to the highest bidder" (AFB 503).

Dina defends her rights by seeking the help of the lawyer Vasantrao Valmik who once met Maneck during a train journey. The lawyer is the mouthpiece of Mistry. He vehemently criticizes the supreme court's verdict in changing the Prime Minister's guilt into innocence. Mistry, through Valmik, remarks: "The Prime Minister cheats in the election, and the relevant law is promptly modified. Ergo, she is not guilty. We poor mortals have to accept that bygone events are beyond our clutch, while the Prime Minister performs juggling acts with time past" (AFB 651). He finds the poet W.B.Yeats' words relevant to the Emergency and he feels that it is the time for anarchy and commotion. He is dejected and quotes Yeats: "...things falling apart, centre not holding, anarchy loosed upon the world, and all that sort of thing" (AFB 656).

The bitter experiences of the ordinary Indians during the emergency period raised many eyebrows and received more opposition from the onlookers. Mankekar and Kamla Mankekar in their Decline and fall of Indira Gandhi says:

In the name of cleaning and beautifying the city, Jhonpatti dwellers were evicted from their homes and dumped on land several miles away and left to fend for themselves. The atrocities committed and brutal force used on the poor people, both rural and urban, in the name of enforcing family planning, in Delhi and all-over northern India, could not have been improved upon Idi Amin's land. (34)

Mistry talks about Indira Gandhi in a harsh tone. He presents her in his works as a corrupt politician who misused her power for the safety of her position. He makes a scathing attack on Indira Gandhi and Sanjay Gandhi. After the declaration of Emergency, Indira had to face a lot of protest against her. But she posed herself as the saviour of the nation in various political meetings and people were forcibly brought to attend the meetings. In her speech as shown in AFB, Indira justifies her imposition of emergency. She explains that she was forced to impose Emergency to save India from the hands of enemies. It is nothing but a measure to fight the forces of evil and the crooks. But the reality is exactly opposite of that. It was her own political career that was in grave danger. Although she justified her imposition of Emergency as a necessary measure to check internal and external disturbance fast-growing in India at that time. But there is more to it than meets the Eye. The truth was far away from whatever was officially told.

Between 1967 and 1971, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi came to obtain near-absolute control over the government and the Indian National Congress party, as well as a huge majority in Parliament. The absolute control over the government was achieved by concentrating all powers of governance within the Prime Minister's Secretariat, rather than the Cabinet. She saw the elected members of cabinet as a threat and distrusted them. She relied the most on her principal secretary, P. N. Haksar, a central figure in Indira's inner circle of advisors. It was Huskar who promoted the idea of a "committed bureaucracy" that required hitherto-impartial government officials to be "committed" to the

ideology of the ruling party of the day. Indira ruthlessly outmanoeuvred her rivals within the party as well. The role and crusade of JP against the existing political and social system needs to be discussed in a little detail here to understand the situation in the country just before the imposition of Emergency. The Congress found a real challenger in the form of Jayaprakash Narayan, popular as JP in the days after independence. The JP movement was one of the most noteworthy moments in India's political scenario since Independence. As JP drew on the enormous discontent prevalent in the country to force a nation-wide movement against Indira Gandhi, he came to represent the voice of opposition in an era when official opposition had all but disappeared. He came to represent people fed up with three decades of corruption, misrule, and ineptitude of the Congress. The main justification of the JP movement was to end corruption in Indian life and politics whose fountainhead was allegedly Indira Gandhi and to defend democracy which was endangered by her dictatorial personality and her authoritarian administrative style. JP often said that Indira Gandhi's continuation in office was "incompatible with the survival of democracy in India." The stage was set for an electoral confrontation between Mrs. Gandhi and JP in the parliamentary elections scheduled after a few months. But a court verdict on 12th June, 1975 changed the entire political situation. Justice Jagmohan Lal Sinha of the Allahabad High Court hearing a petition of electoral malpractices convicted Mrs. Gandhi of indulging in corrupt campaigning practices in the parliamentary elections of 1971 and declared her election null and void. The conviction meant she could not hold on to the office of prime minister as well. JP and the opposition seized the occasion, accused her of "clinging to an office corruptly gained" and demanded her immediate resignation. In a rally in the national capital JP and his associates announced a nation-wide civil disobedience movement to force her resignation. In his speech JP asked people to make it impossible for the government to function and asked the armed forces, police personnel and the bureaucracy to refuse to obey orders they considered "illegal and unconstitutional". Mrs. Gandhi lightening response was to declare a state of Internal Emergency in the whole country on 26th June, 1975. It was the darkest hour for democracy in post-independent India.

After the proclamation of Emergency, orders were issued for the arrest of opposition leaders all over the country. Darbara Singh, in his Indian Politics 1968-1978, describes the condition, "No sooner had the President signed the proclamation than a large number of arrests of Opposition leaders, all over the country, were made. For Delhi, especially, Lieutenant Governor, asked for three additional armed police battalions. Shri Jayaprakash Narayan was arrested from Delhi at 4.00 am" (21-22).

The Government cited threats to national security, as a war with Pakistan had recently been concluded. Due to the war and additional challenges of drought and the 1973 oil crisis, the economy was in poor condition. The Government claimed that the strikes and protests had paralysed the government and hurt the economy of the country greatly. In the face of massive political opposition, desertion and disorder across the country and the party, Gandhi stuck to the advice of a few loyalists and her younger son Sanjay Gandhi, whose own power had grown considerably over the last few years to become an "extra-constitutional

authority". Siddhartha Shankar Ray, the Chief Minister of West Bengal, proposed to the prime minister to impose an "internal emergency". He drafted a letter for the President to issue the proclamation based on information Indira had received that "there is an imminent danger to the security of India being threatened by internal disturbances". He showed "how democratic freedom could be suspended while remaining within the ambit of the Constitution" (Nayyar). During that dark phase, all civil rights were suspended and the freedom of speech and expression muzzled. The emergency was a big blow to the democratic principles that the country had cherished after independence. The government invoked Press censorship along with the imposition of Emergency as it wanted to control and manipulate the Press to suppress public opinion. The Press was the only independent mass media in India during that time as the radio and the television were controlled by the government. As L.K. Advani, a prominent opposition leader then and later minister in the Morarji Desai and Atal Behari Vajpayee governments underlined in an interview "when Mrs. Gandhi asked the media to bend, they crawled" (Advani). Much of the media reaction can be summarized by this comment.

"This was a circumstance when sections of the Press turned a blind eye to ethics and filed reports that had communal insinuations which were not only unethical but dangerous in a country torn over communal strife just after partition" (Karkhanis).

Coomi Kapoor who was a journalist with The Indian Express stated "Mrs. Gandhi deeply resented the fact that almost all the major newspapers in their editorials had advised her to step down after the Allahabad judgment. Perhaps that was the reason for Press censorship during the entire Emergency period and the heavy cudgels on journalists." And the impact of these draconian measures taken by the authoritarian government is focused in AFB. The chaotic condition during the Emergency is depicted and portrayed from the point of view of its victimized and not the victimizer.

Thus, the novel draws the ruler in an unfavourable light and is replete with the narration of many unhappy things. Detention of students, evacuating slums, forced vasectomy, police brutality, retaliatory murders were some of the cruel measures adopted during Emergency. All these facts make *A Fine Balance* qualify to be called 'a template for a stark as well as an unsparing portrait' of our country during those trying times.

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