

# The Horrors of Emergency as Depicted in Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance*.

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**Abstract**—Indian English literature has emerged as a result of British invasion in India and among its various genres fiction plays a major role as it expresses the consciousness of life and society in its true sense. The last three decades has witnessed an unprecedented output in fiction in India. The new fiction category stands unmatched by any other period in the growth and development in Indian English novel as it gives a realistic picture of contemporary India. Rohinton Mistry, Indian Diasporic writer, tries to depict some of the major political and social issues that were prevalent in Indian history. This paper focuses on Mistry's second novel *A Fine Balance* and aims to study the impact of Emergency period in India as depicted in the novel.

**Index Terms**—Indian English fiction, Indian Diaspora, State of Emergency

## I. INTRODUCTION

Indian English literature, frequently referred to as Indo-Anglian literature, has emerged as a result of British invasion. It comprises of literary works by Indian writers who write in English language and is also associated with the writings of the members of Indian Diaspora. With its wide variety of themes and ideologies, Indian English literature has occupied a major place in the world literature. Indian English writers are internationally acclaimed and are widely read.

The popular genre of Indian English literature includes poetry, prose, fiction and drama. Fiction can be considered as the most powerful genre in literature which can express the consciousness of life and society in its true sense. Fiction as a form of creative expression began to emerge in India as a result of European invasion. It can be rightly said that novel in India is a byproduct of colonialism. The colonial life and experience have given birth to the Indian English fiction. Indian English fiction depicts the consciousness of life and society. The social, cultural,

economic and political life of Indian is clearly portrayed in Indian fiction.

The last three decade has witnessed an unprecedented output in fiction in India. This new fiction category stands unmatched by any other period in the growth and development in Indian English novel. Among them the Indian diasporic writers play a major role. "Diaspora is defined as a group of people who come from a particular nation or whose ancestors comes from a particular nation but who now live in other parts of the world" (Aishwarya Johnson). Diasporic writers mainly focus on themes like homeland, dislocation, displacement, identity crisis and alienation. Writers like Salman Rushdie, Anita Desai, Kiran Desai, JhumpaLahiri, Rohinton Mistry have established themselves as fine writers in the tradition of Indian Diasporic writing.

Rohinton Mistry is a Bombay born Canadian writer. He migrated to Canada in 1975 and there he obtained a BA in English and Philosophy. He belongs to the Parsi Community and he depicts the life of middle class Parsi community in his works. He portrays the common life of Parsi in Bombay touchingly and at the same time he deals with the social and political themes of contemporary period. Mistry who himself is a diasporic writer deals with the diaspora experienced by the Parsi community. The Zoroastrian Parsi was persecuted in Iran after the Islamic conquest and was migrated to India in the beginning of the 8<sup>th</sup> century. As an immigrant minority in India Parsi community faces a sense of displacement and Mistry who is Parsi as well as an Indian immigrant in Canada experiences double displacement. Mistry tries to depict these experiences in his works.

Mistry began his literary career with the publication of his collection of 11 short stories entitled *Tales from FirozshaBaag*. His first novel *Such a Long Journey* was published in 1991. The novel won Governor General's Award and the Common Wealth Writers

prize for Best Book. Even though the novel earned much acclaim, it was controversial in India for its remarks about Maharastrians. *A Fine Balance* and *Family Matters* are other two important novels of Mistry.

*A Fine Balance*, published in 1995, is Mistry's second novel. The novel was shortlisted for Booker Prize in 1996. The novel is set in an unidentified city during the turmoil of Emergency in India. The novel focuses on the life of four major characters: Dina Dalal, Ishvar Darji and his nephew Om Prakash and a young student Maneck Kohlah. In this novel, Mistry tries to portray the impact of Emergency in the lives of the people in India.

Emergency period is one of the most controversial and darkest periods in the history of independent India. The state of Emergency was declared by then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi for a period of 21 months from 1975 to 1977. The internal disturbances prevailing in the country lead to the declaration of Emergency. The Emergency has bestowed upon the Prime Minister with absolute power. Election was suspended and all the civil rights and liberties were curbed during this period. Press was censored and several other human rights were violated which includes forced sterilization campaign and with the new law MISA anybody could be imprisoned without trial and there were countless deaths in police custody. It was a period of horror:

It was on June 25, 1975, that independent India experienced its darkest hour. An hour that will live long in infamy as one of grave consequences. . . if you speak to those who lived through it, you would realize that the scars of emergency linger fresh both in nation's DNA as well as those who experienced the horror. (India TV)

The Emergency period forms the backdrop of the entire novel *A Fine Balance*. Mistry gives a realist portrayal of the horror and impact of Emergency. When Ishvar and Om are direct victims of Emergency, Dina and Maneck are indirectly affected by its horror. Various programmes as part of emergency like City Beautification project, Slum Evacuation programme and forced sterilization wreaked havoc in the lives of Ishvar and Om, "Every atrocities known to have committed during the Emergency happens to Mr. Mistry's characters, so that they become a template for a stark portrait of that period in India" (Shashi Tharoor).

The epigraph sets the mood of the novel. It clearly states that this is a novel of suffering, death and degradation in Emergency period of India. The novel is a tragedy of misfortunes in which the declaration of emergency plays a major role. The epigraph of the novel is taken from *Le Pere Goriot* by Honore de Balzac and it says, "After you have read this story of great misfortunes, you will no doubt dine well, blaming the author for your own insensitivity, accusing him of wild exaggeration and flights of fancy. But rest assured: this tragedy is not a fiction. All is true" (Mistry).

Ishvar and Om belonged to the chamar caste and they were marginalized and treated as untouchables. In order to escape from the restrictive caste system, they learn a new profession, tailoring. When they moved from their village to the 'city by the sea' they hoped for better opportunities and dreams of a new life. They struggle to have a better life but their simplest dream was crushed by Emergency.

The first blow came in the form of Slum Evacuation Programme. As part of the programme, slums were demolished and flattened to ground. Ishvar and Om lost their small hut and they did not have a place to go. They collected whatever is remaining and wandered all around the city in search of a place to live in. But soon they realized that even to sleep on the platform they must pay the police man.

The city beautification campaign as part of slum evacuation was another great blow on people like Ishvar and Om. Beggars, pavement dwellers, scrap dealers and rag pickers were all forced into trucks and taken to the construction site as part of the campaign. They were forced to work without proper food, clothing or shelter. They were ill-treated in the labour camp and they have no other way but to escape from the camp:

When the whistle sounded for lunch, Om, like Ishvar, felt he was too exhausted to eat the watery mix of vegetables. But they knew they must, if they were to survive the rest of the day. They swallowed the food quickly and slipped into the shadow of their tin hut to rest a while. . . a gush of vomit followed. . . fighting dizziness they hunkered down. (Mistry 347)

Even after facing all these difficulties, they still hope that they can live a better life. But the final blow came into their life in the form of compulsory sterilization. Ishvar and Om who had gone to visit their village in search of a bride for Om were

forcefully taken away for sterilization. Om who dreamed of a family life was castrated at the sterilization camp. Ishvar on the other hand was amputated due to blood poisoning from unsterilized vasectomy. Ishvar and Om who moved to city in a hope to make a better life ended up as beggars. All their hopes, dreams and life were shattered by the Emergency.

Dina is another character in the novel who is affected by Emergency. Dina belonged to a wealthy family but misfortune came to her life in the form of her father's death. When her brother took the responsibility of the family it was Dina who suffered. She was forced to quit school and ended up doing household chores. She was a burden to her brother and he abused her. Her life changed for better when she married her lover but her happiness didn't last long. She lost her husband on their third wedding anniversary but she stayed strong. She never wanted to return to her brother but to live on her own. She started a tailoring unit and was quite successful. But the declaration of Emergency had its effect of Dina's life. Dina was forced to shut down her tailoring business and since she had no other way she moved in with her brother. Dina's dream to live an independent life is crushed down by Emergency.

Maneck is another important character in the novel. Even though he was not directly affected by Emergency, the impact it had on the lives of his dear ones makes him a victim of Emergency. After his return from Dubai, he learns how Emergency had ruined the life of Dina, Om, Ishvar and Avinash. Avinash was Maneck's college friend and a student activist. He was against Mrs. Gandhi's anti-democratic rule and was involved in protest. He was arrested by the police and no one knows what happened to him. Since he was the only hope for his family, his missing devastates the family. His three sisters committed suicide because their father was not able to provide them dowry and was humiliated by the society. The news about Avinash and his sisters' upsets Maneck and along with this, the tragedy of Dina, Om and Ishvar shatters him. He finds no reason to live in a hopeless country and he committed suicide.

The novel *A Fine Balance* thus portrays how the Emergency period has shattered the lives of millions of people in India. It is indeed one of the most anti-democratic and darkest periods in the history of

independent India. Om, Ishvar, Dina and Maneck are either directly or indirectly the victim of Emergency and their tragedy reminds the reader the horrors of Emergency.

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