

A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF THE IMPACT OF NATIONAL EMERGENCY OF 1975 ESPECIALLY ON WOMEN PROTAGONISTS AS REPRESENTED IN THE NOVELS: *RICH LIKE US* BY NAYANTARA SAHGAL AND *A FINE BALANCE* BY ROHINTON MISTRY

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Abstract

Like all other history, the history of Independent India is woven around many unforgettable events. One such moment is the Emergency of 1975-1977. The period of Emergency does not fit comfortably into the national picture of how things are meant to be. Emergency it seems to challenge the discourse of democracy itself. In my paper, my humble attempt is to compare and contrast the pictures of the women protagonists as being craved in Rich Like Us and A Fine Balance. A Fine Balance penned by Rohinton Mistry, whose novels reflect his concern for his community more and the other is Rich Like Us by Nayantara Sahgal who is renowned as a historical writer are studied, analyzed, and compared. Both the novels depict the struggle of women to survive in the hostile socio-political set up. Mistry weaves a subtle and compelling narrative about four unlikely characters that come together soon after the government declares a 'state of Internal Emergency.' They are aspiring for different pursuits, their fates bring them together to 'sail under one flag'. In a tiny flat of Dina Dalal, the protagonist of the novel A Fine Balance, Ishwar and Omprakash Darji and Manek Kohlah, a young student are painfully constructing new lives, which become entwined in circumstances no one could have foreseen. As the novel advances, circumstances conspire to deny them their modest aspirations. They all discover that there are other forces at play larger than their individual self. Each faces irrevocable damages. In Rich Like Us the protagonist, Sonali Ranade is a civil servant in the Ministry of Industry and is against the contemporary bureaucratic regime. She is not portrayed as the stereo-typed version of Indian womanhood. She is made of quite a different stuff. She is intelligent and has the strength to rebel against the stale thoughts and outdated customs and rituals. She rebels against society not passively but with concrete manifestation of creating a new image of Indian Womanhood. She takes a step further then Dina Dalal....

Keywords:- Rohinton Mistry, Nayantara Sahgal, Dina Dalal

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'Nothing that happens in the future can undo this past'

- John Dayal and Ajoy Bose

The violence that accompanies the Chauri Chaura in 1922, the horror of Partition in 1947-48, in the same way The Emergency is equally remembered as another violent moment in the history of India. Along with threatening the perilous image of India as essentially non-violent, it also connects the state as the key agent of violence.

Rohinton Mistry's second novel, 'A Fine Balance' is a significant landmark in the Indian fiction in English, presenting a stark and moving portrait of life during the Emergency.' (Tharoor, p:9) The novel spans a period of about 40 years of free India. With the city in the center, Mistry weaves a subtle and compelling narrative about four unlikely characters that come together soon after the government declares 'a state of Internal Emergency.' They are aspiring for different pursuits, their fate bring them together 'to sail under one flag'

Rich Like Us is considered to be the most ambitious and complex novels of Nayantara Sahgal. It has bagged two prestigious award: the Sinclair Prize for fiction in 1985 and the Indian Sahitya Akademi Award for the best book in English for the year 1986. The novel is set in the Mrs. Indira Gandhi's Emergency, where the power became arbitrary and where the corrupt and the opportunists flourished. In this respect Jasbir Jain states, '(Rich Like Us).... reflects not only her personal values but also the changing values of a country exposed for the first time to both freedom and power,' (Jasbir: 1990) It also narrates the story of an older India, of a generation who remember the British Raj and Partition, of the continuities and the ties of family, caste and religion.

Both the novels are written by two different writers: one is by a male and the other by a female. Rohinton Mistry is more concerned about his community than the history of

the country whereas Nayantara Sahgal is only concerned with the politics and the history of the country. One common point of study in both the novels is the story of the novels is set in the country where the country is facing the brutality of the Emergency i.e. in the 70's. The characters in both the novels are undergoing one or the other trauma of the Emergency.

In the tiny flat of Dina Dalal, a beautiful widow in her forties, Ishwar and Omprakash Darji and Manek Kohlah, a young student are painfully constructing new lives, which become entwined in circumstances no one could have foreseen. At first Dina and her tailor, Om are apprehensive about each other's concerns. As the novel advances, circumstances conspire to deny them their modest aspirations. They all discover that there are other forces at play larger than their individual self. Each faces irrevocable damages. The author very vividly describes Maneck's disappointments and death.

Mistry is pre-occupied with the period of Internal Emergency. He presents insider-outsider status which enables the readers to view the situation from different angles and has added a political-historical dimension to the novel. Mistry, as Homi Bhabha would put it, 'represents the cutting edge between the totalizing power of the social and the forces that signify the more specific address to contentious, unequal interest and identities within the population.' (Bhabha, 1990; 279-99)

In this novel, the characters articulate the author's concerns more vocally. Mistry is skeptical about the declaration of the Emergency and centralizes the exclusions of the historiographers. The author is more concerned with "murder, suicide, Naxalite-terrorist killing, police-custody death...." (AFB: 6). The authorial feelings are conveyed distinctly in the epigraph:

'Holding this book in your hand, sinking back in your soft armchair, you will say to yourself: Perhaps it will amuse me. And 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.' (AFB: Epigraph)

He steers his narrative in the desired direction by presenting more than one versions of the same event. For instance, for a common man the Emergency is, 'No consideration for people like us. Murder, Suicide...everything ends up delaying the trains.' (AFB: 9) Those holding some influential post are happy as,

'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:299).

For Dina, it is only 'government problems games played by people in power. It does not affect ordinary people like us.' (AFB:75). However, she is proved wrong as it did affect the ordinary people in more than one way. The upper-class people were fascinated by the Emergency. For them, it is a magic wand, capable of curing all diseases and decay.

The beautification drives deprived people of their homes and the forced sterilization camps deprived youth like Om of their dreams. The officers-in-charge of various projects manipulated the figures to their advantage. People were reduced to a commodity.

Dina's struggle and endurance represent a woman's plight in the society. Though Maneck and Dina are Parsis, the community does not occupy the center, like the preceding work of Mistry. The novel is also a story of the heroic struggle of Dina and her two tailors to survive a world of segregation, oppression and corruption in which honest work is denied and punished by a totalitarian system. Freedom remains a dream for Dina, who spent sixteen years fending for herself and yet had to return to her tyrant brother. Almost all her attempts at taking control of her life are thwarted either by fate or by the manmade systems: social or political. Despite serious objections from her brother she marries Rustom, who dies in an accident. She starts her life afresh venturing into the business of tailoring with the help of Om and his uncle. Despite all the problems, she experiences a little spell of freedom to live the way she wants to live. It is in this brief period that she decides to weave a patch work quilt as a gift to Om's bride. When Zenobia visits her place, she tells her: 'Look at this quilt I made it. It's going to be Om's wedding present.' (AFB: 547). This patchwork quilt thus symbolizes Dina's hope, which is belied when Sergeant Kesar serves the court order of eviction. Freedom, thus, remains a cherished yet unattainable goal because of the tyranny of Emergency which is under sharp focus in this novel. Under this system Dina simply cannot approach the law courts because of the powers given to corrupt officials like Sergeant Kesar. She has thus to live by striking a balance between hope and despair.

B. M. Sinha's *Operation Emergency*, a slim paperback completed only in 10 weeks after the March election, is a potted history of the Emergency experience, printed dramatically in heavy black ink on the back cover:

- Political leaders and workers, intellectuals and journalists nabbed in the midnight swoop and jailed

- Press gagged, and emasculated
- Prisoners subjected to torture and unheard of brutality
- Houses and bazaars bulldozed into rubble
- Men and women driven like cattle into FP (Family Planning) Camps
- The CAUCUS striking terror, unhindered by the law
- Sycophants and Hangers-on calling the tune

To some it was simply power and opportunity, for some it was the time for hero worship and for the common man it was exploitation, deprivation and torture. All and many other objectives and functioning of the Emergency have been exposed in *Rich Like Us* and *A Fine Balance*. Rohinton Mistry gives an insider outsider but authentic portrayal of India. The novel reflects the reality of India, the politics of corruption, tyranny, exploitation, violence and bloodshed. The novel also gives an insight into rural India focusing on the injustice, the cruelty, and the horror of deprivation and portrays the trauma of India along communal, religious and linguistic lines. In the same way, Sahgal considers her novels to be political both in content and intention. She declares... “...each of the novels, more or less, reflects the political era we are passing through.” (Sahgal, 1976)

Rich Like Us depicts the story of India where power became arbitrary, and where the corrupt and the opportunists flourished. The novel is said to be the story of two women, Rose, an unwanted white leftover and Sonali, an emergency thrown out. Sonali Ranade is a civil servant in the Ministry of Industry. She completed her studies in India and went to Oxford for higher studies. To give Indian Womanhood a new image different from the traditional one Sonali is presented as a top notch at the IAS competitive examination. She is shown having the intellectual strength to rebel against the outdated customs and thoughts of the traditional society. She protests against the idea of arranged marriage. She very strongly refuses to grant permission to open the fizzy drink Hapyola factory to Dev. She revolts overtly and fearlessly against the bureaucratic set up. Instead of being appreciated for having done her duty with a sense of patriotism she is victimized by the system under Emergency and receives her transfer order she is reverted from her responsible position in the civil service. She was unaware that the proposal was blessed by her seniors which she rejected but she also expressed that had it been that she had known about the proposal she might have acted the same. She is not ready to compromise the dictatorship in Emergency and she says... ‘The Emergency has finished my career, but suddenly I did not want a career in the crumbling unprofessionalism that bowed and scraped to a bogus emergency.’ (p 175)

Rose is the other character from the novel who is brutally murdered by her step son Dev. She is the second wife of a rich businessman named Ram. Despite knowing about Ram being married she marries him and comes to India. She saves the life of Ram’s first wife

Mona and befriends with her. She is outspoken but a kind hearted brave lady who is murdered after she became widow by economically motivated Dev her step son. Here Sonali compares her death with the 'Sati'. She is the epitome of redemption through personal courage. She suffers the injustice and even death during Emergency. She has been humiliated and robbed of even a decent living allowance by Dev, who keeps drawing money from the joint account of Ram and Rose by forging the signature of his paralyzed father. Sonali tried to help her but useless. The bank manager who was aware of the forgery expressed his inability to stop it.

Both these women are typical women's from Sahgal. They are independent, assertive, self-respecting, full of human kindness, and sympathetic and having strength to face any difficulty in life. They are many times used as the mouth piece of the author. The narrative is planned in a double vision as the Emergency is objectively narrated by the novelist and the consciousness of Sonali is used as a filter.

The incident of dragging the people to the vasectomy camp is very clearly pictured in both the novels. Here in *Rich Like Us* Rose protests when the beggar, who has no arms is nearly forced to the camp by Dev's wife Nishi. In order to convince her she says... 'It's no use taking him, he is not even a whole man. He won't count.' (p 98). It gives a metaphorical meaning to the situation a citizen whose hands are cut and he was to be handless beggar for life in this political scenario. As a contrary there are bureaucratic sensitive souls like Sonali who refuse to be the part to all the corruption even though they are thrown out of the system.

The declaration of Emergency was nothing but the fast exchange of power from mother to the son, the beautification camp was nothing but blowing up tenements, vasectomizing the masses and setting up youth camps. Criminals were blinded by the police with needles dipped in acid as for all types of punishment for all the crimes. T. N. Dhar comments,

'One of the dismal features of the times, the novel stresses, was that Madam, (Mrs. Gandhi in the novel) succeeded in getting the support of lawyers, professors, newspaper editors, and other liberal and progressive groups for her unrestricted use of power.' (Dhar, 153).

In *A Fine Balance* it is the middle class lady who is not much literate is in center, whereas in Sahgal Sonali a highly literate and assertive protagonist articulates the grim reality prevailing in the society at that time. Sonali who is grown up in the world full of idealistic thoughts of his freedom fighter father and who is herself filled with ideals is shaken by the events of 1976. Earlier the civil servants were considered the steel

framework of the government are now been made to crack so as to support the disguise called Emergency. She says:

'We knew this was no emergency. If it had been, the priorities would have been quite different. We were all taking part in a thinly disguised masquerade, preparing the stage for the family rule. And we were involved in a conspiracy of silence, which is why we were careful not to do more than say hello when we passed each other in the building, and not to talk about our work after hours, which made after hours sessions silent indeed. No one wanted troubles.' (RLU: 23-24).

Just like Dina, Sonali also had to pay a lot during Emergency. Her strong opinions on democracy cost her job. She felt helpless when she was not able to help Rose. The suffocating political environment suffocates her. On first reading *Rich Like Us* seems to be the story of the two protagonists, Sonali and Rose, but on deeper analysis it conveys the multi-layer of meaning: feminist text, the text with politics as the lead, historical detailing and much more. *A Fine Balance* on one hand narrates the story of Parsi lady with mediocre studies wants to lead her independent life but the political upheaval doesn't permit her. Thus, in both the novels to generalize the women protagonists whether they are well educated or not have to suffer at the hands of political disturbances as a chief cause.

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