



Trials and Tribulations of Common Man During Emergency in Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance*

Yashika Bisht^{1*} and Shweta Saxena¹

¹ Amity Institute of English Studies and Research, Amity University, Noida, INDIA.

*Corresponding Author (Email: yashikabisht5@gmail.com).

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Abstract

This paper highlights the plight of the sufferings of the common man during the Emergency period (1975-77) which was declared by Mrs. Indira Gandhi who was the Prime Minister during that period. The paper narrates the life of two tailors, Omprakash Darji and Ishvar, during the Emergency period and how they were affected by the Emergency excesses. *A Fine Balance* is perhaps Mistry's most successful work so far. It depicts the story of four characters Dina, Ishvar, Omprakash and Maneck Kohlah. It portrays the effect of Mrs. Gandhi's Emergency on these characters. The two tailors go through extraordinarily difficult circumstances in life; from withstanding pennilessness to the unbearable torture by the government on them, leaving their lives irreparably jeopardised. The paper focuses on the tailors' as being scapegoats of Mrs. Gandhi's Family Planning and City Beautification Programmes.

Disciplinary: English Literature, India History, Social and Family Studies, Public Administration.

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1. Introduction

Rohinton Mistry is "considered to be one of the foremost authors of Indian heritage writing in English (Goodreads)". Mistry's figment of imagination unfolds a composing style of writing. It also conveys frightfulness of life to communicate profound kindness for the human creatures. The writings of Mistry basically concern those people who struggle to find self-worth in a family which patronises or sympathises or suppresses the individuals. Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* "offers

an interpretation of the novel's central themes of resistance and resignation” (Almond, 2004). The Emergency Period (1975-77) brought with it a lot of controversies that are still afresh. In *A Fine Balance*, Mistry depicts how common people got badly affected due to policies of government. The then Prime Minister of India, Mrs. Indira Gandhi, who declared Emergency, introduced many policies and programmes which were being formulated for the amelioration of the common man but instead it proved to be a curse for most of the people. Schneller (2001) asserts that Mistry might not be a historian but his novel does invoke “historical thinking” which is necessary for historical writing (ibid).

The delineation of the characters of the two tailors in *A Fine Balance* brings to the fore the lives of the common man being overpowered by the high-class society and how being powerless and poor is a curse in such a society where they are being treated like animals. The paper will discuss the trials and tribulations of the common man and how their life was made dreary by a woman during the course of Emergency. Currently, no research has focused on the trials and tribulations of two male characters Om and Ishvar due to the oppressive policies of a woman, Mrs. Gandhi. Hence, this research paper will attempt to fill this research gap.

2. Literature Review

A Fine Balance by Mistry “is a postmodern storytelling of India's economic development during the 1975-77 Emergency (Tokaryk, 2005).” *A Fine Balance*, “initiates an investigation of globalization’s rhetoric of promise and connectedness, and introduce a review of related research and other non - fictional writings (Jubas, 2005).” By way of all the drama and turmoil in the lives of the ordinary beings, the readers get to see the world and India through the eyes of the characters created by the author. Mistry’s *A Fine Balance* creates “we get an intimate view, not only of their world but also of India itself in all its extraordinary variety. As the characters move from distrust to friendship and from friendship to love, *A Fine Balance* creates an enduring panorama of the human spirit in an inhuman state” (Mistry, 2001). According to Campu (2009), *A Fine Balance* marks a significant place in the world of historical novels which talks about an India that was born after independence. It throws light on the existence of the regular human beings and how their lives get affected because of the people who have the authority. It deals with the helplessness with which people lead their lives everyday and struggle to make their way out of it.

3. Trials and Tribulations of Common Man During Emergency

In the novel *A Fine Balance*, Omprakash Darji and Ishvar are the tailors who worked for a woman named Dina. Omprakash was Ishvar’s nephew. They did not have their shop so they used to go to work in different places to earn their living. They had come from the village to the town to earn their bread and butter. Their only talent being stitching helped them in fetching the job of tailors. Unfortunately, both these tailors were the victims at the hands of the Emergency of which Mrs. Gandhi was the ruler. She and her government had overturned the lives of the common people. It was only three weeks into their jobs at Dina’s house when the trouble started. Dina’s landlord was creating problems for her and she was being served with a warning notice to stop any

“commercial activities immediately or face eviction (Mistry, 1995, p. 90).” Dina requested the tailors to keep this work a secret and that if anyone asks them of their presence in the house, they would say that they were the domestic help for her. Omprakash on being called out a servant for Dina was unhappy. He was bummed out with all the events happening around and also wished to be dead long back when his family was scorched to death.

The tailors belonged to the low caste and Narayan who was Omprakash’s father and Ishvar leant tailoring leaving behind their family’s work of being cobblers. Ishvar wanted to go to town and establish his tailoring work there. Life in the village had been very challenging and even if he would have opened up a shop there, people were poor enough to afford it and give money for their stitching. That’s why he was more bent towards the city for better opportunities and money. Narayan and Ishvar were brothers and Omprakash was Narayan’s son. Narayan did very well in his tailoring business and had also made a ‘pakka’ house. As a child, Omprakash was also being sent with Ishvar to become proficient in tailoring. Narayan and his family were set on fire in their house after he had tried to raise his voice against the injustice done during the voting. The upper caste, powerful men made lives difficult for the lower castes. Only Ishvar and Omprakash survived as they were in the city. Both had dreamed of a beautiful future in the city, of its colossal structure, of getting to see thousands of people going to work and other such imaginations. But they had a rough start on the very first day as the man who was supposed to help them in the city turned out to be helpless himself. He did not have enough food and space for his own family so he could not take an additional burden of the tailors. Nor was there any work for them available which left them going from place to place in search of it.

After months of search, the two tailors finally found jobs as tailors with a Parsi lady, Dina Dalal. They even managed to rent a small room of their own to stay. Omprakash was not much happy with the place but they had to adjust to that kind of living. The real problem had just begun with the pronouncement of Emergency rule by the Prime Minister, Mrs. Indira Gandhi. Under this Emergency regime, there were many policies that were brought into force of which the Family Planning Programme was given the utmost weightage. When Ishvar and Omprakash went to the Ration office to obtain a ration card for themselves, they were asked to present a sterilisation certificate. Ishvar lied to the officer of already having got the operation done but then he was asked to present the certificate for the same. He then gave an excuse that his certificate got destroyed due to a mishap in his shack. But this excuse was not considered as he was asked by the officer to undergo the operation again. When the officer asked Omprakash instead for the operation, Ishvar asserted that he was just a teenager and he is yet to get married and have kids. So, after all these arguments, they finally left the place without a ration card. The tailors were agitated with what all had happened at the Ration Office. But the Emergency had made the lives difficult for everyone even the government officers as all they wanted was targets. “...since the Emergency started, there’s a new rule in the department- every officer has to encourage people to get sterilized. If he does not fill his quota, no promotion for him. What to do, poor fellow, he is also trapped, no” (178)?

The Emergency rules had made lives horrible for poor and powerless people while the police enjoyed it as they had complete authority to do what they wanted. If anyone was found going against the Emergency, that person was either beaten or arrested and was forced to obey what the authorities had to say.

When the Prime Minister used to come to address people in a particular area, people were being taken forcefully in buses in huge numbers and were also given promises of money and food after the PM's speech. Though it was all a lie, the people were forced to go otherwise they were being warned of getting arrested. Omprakash and Ishvar were forced to go too which made them miss their work at Dina's. The snacks were served after the speech, but the queue was very long. Hardly were people getting half a cup of tea. And when Om's and Ishvar's turn was about to come, the buses got ready to go. Obviously, the buses were the only means of transport to go back home and people left the snacks and ran towards the buses. While boarding the bus, everyone was being paid four rupees though a promise was made to pay five. But they cut one rupee for the tea, snacks, and bus fare. The tailors were very upset for a day being wasted and hence the loss of money. The bus which was supposed to drop them back to their home left them in the middle of nowhere and the rest of the journey had to be done on foot while it rained heavily. Such was the kind of injustice being done on the people and there was no one to listen to their woes.

Dina was upset with the tailors for being absent from work without any information. She warned them that if they do not come to work regularly and on time, she will hire new tailors. The tailors were helpless and they did not want to lose their jobs. So they tried and made sure that they work well and are not absent from work. The City Beautification Programme which was also one of the programmes of the Prime Minister's Emergency had left many people homeless. The people in slums were driven out of their homes by trick and later bulldozers were run over their houses. The tailors' slum was destroyed under this programme as according to the City Beautification Programme the city had to look neat, clean and attractive and the slums were just destroying that beauty. Omprakash and Ishvar were disheartened to lose their home. The bulldozers stopped for a while and gave people the opportunity to collect their personal belongings from their homes. Ishvar and Omprakash went in to collect a few leftovers in their hut like blankets and a few sheets though most of their things were also destroyed. Though most of their things were also destroyed, there were a few left things left like their quilts and linen. Next Ishvar and Omprakash went to the same man, Nawab, with whom they had stayed for sometime when they first came to the city. But unfortunately, he was arrested on false accusations. This was the kind of injustice being done on poor people by the powerful ones who had good connections with the police and politicians.

The police held the ultimate power during the Emergency period and no one could challenge them or question them even if they were doing or supporting the wrong. The two tailors had no place to go after Nawab was arrested. They were brought on the road by Mrs. Gandhi's government and its useless policies. That night they could not find anywhere to sleep except at the railway station that was already full of homeless people. Even the following night, the tailors did not find

any place to sleep. They roamed from streets to streets in search of shelter, but could not find any. Even the hotels which they searched for to stay did not fit their budget. Then they tried to find spots in front of the shops. But most of them were already booked by the people who used to sleep there daily, so taking someone else's spot could land them in trouble. The tailors finally found a place to sleep for three rupees each night in front of a pharmacy where they had requested the night watchman to help them out. They paid the watchman three rupees a night and also "some free tailoring" (307). One can imagine the kind of life the tailors were leading due to the Emergency which had taken away their sleep and shelter, both. Though they had found temporary shelter, it did not guarantee them a good night's sleep. The nightwatchman warned them of the customers coming in the middle of the night for medications. As they started spending their nights on the streets, life became all the more difficult. They hardly got to sleep properly because there used to be customers in the middle of the night who came to take medicines hence the tailors had to get up and shift their bedding whenever a customer came. Carrying their trunk along every day to work and back was also challenging. The sleeplessness added to their work burden resulting in headaches and difficulty while stitching. Both the tailors were struggling to live properly each day. They were tired of living such a life in the city. Their lives had been miserable ever since the declaration of the Emergency by Mrs. Gandhi and her new rules. Carrying the trunk to work and back to the place where they used to sleep was becoming challenging with each passing day. The tailors' body right from their shoulders to the wrist had become so painful that they could not even sew properly at work which worried Dina (312). Seeing their condition, Dina allowed the tailors to leave the trunk at her verandah. And now the tailors did not have to carry that extra burden anymore. They changed their clothes from the trunk each evening and left after work. They had now become accustomed to the noises in the streets and could sleep better than before which resulted in the improvement of their work.

With much difficulty, the tailors' lives had become a bit stable when other big trouble landed on them. One night the policemen came with other influential people and took all the people who were sleeping on the streets. The tailors were among those arrested as according to the government, sleeping on the streets was illegal. Even after much explanation and requests, the police refused to listen to them. And when the tailors refused to get in the truck, the police constable hit Om with his stick. Such was the barbarity been done by the police during the Emergency. First, their homes were been destroyed which forced them to sleep on the streets and then they were been picked up from the streets declaring their acts as illegal. The rules formulated by the government were getting on the nerves of these poor homeless people. The tailors tried to explain that they were being picked up by mistake and that they are tailors but no one listened to them and they were forced to work as labourers there. Also, they could not inform Dina of the situation they were in and their absence from work. This made Dina angry and anxious as she had to deliver an order which was to be finished as early as possible but the absence of tailors from work made it a difficult situation for her.

Ishvar and Omprakash tried all ways out to reach the top man who could understand that they are tailors and let them be free. But no one was ready to listen to their plea. One of the men even warned them that if they give a thumbs down to the job being given to them, they would be taken away forcibly and then no one would be able to help them. Their condition was horrible and all the labourers were being mistreated there. They hardly got good food to eat and water to drink. Foul language was being used if anyone stopped working even for a minute. After spending a week of working as labourers, the tailors had started to feel as if they were in some kind of a nether world. Everyday there were scenes of their fellow labourers being knocked around or ridiculed. One day their slippers were stolen while they were asleep and they had to go barefoot for work which made their day more strenuous and by the end of the day they had difficulty walking. Ishvar's condition was falling apart so he had to see a doctor who prescribed him an ointment. After a day's rest, he had to be back for work with an inflamed and stinging foot. No mercy was shown on them. With the help of a few people, the tailors managed to get out of the irrigation project site thus thanking their stars for the luck but who knew what lay ahead.

The tailors finally reached Dina's place somehow and after seeing her, they could not stop crying. They gave an account of what terrible things had happened with them and how they had almost escaped death. They were very scared and thankful at the same time. Ishvar was highly gratified to Dinabai for giving them a roof to sleep under, as they were terror-stricken with all the Emergency things happening all around. The tailors had had a dreadful experience in the past few weeks because of Mrs. Gandhi's Emergency and they could not stop thanking Dina for being so generous to them. Dina let them sleep on the verandah till the time they found a place to stay which was not going to happen anytime soon. Their lives had been peaceful now for quite a while.

Ishvar wanted Om to get married and settle in his life but Om was not willing to. Both the tailors go back to their village to look for a bride for Om. Meanwhile, Dina also prepared for the new bride's welcome at her home. Life seemed beautiful for all of them. The tailors stayed at their uncle's, Ashraf's place in the village who had initially taught them tailoring. Their peaceful lives were turned into a nightmare when the police arrested them from the marketplace and they had no idea of the reason for their arrest. They were being put into a truck and dragged to the sterilisation camp. They both were being dragged for sterilisation. Ishvar kept requesting everyone that they did not belong to that place but everyone ignored. He requested them to spare Om as he was yet to get married and vasectomy would ruin his life and instead perform the operation only on him. But even after so many requests, the operation was being done and now the tailors were the victims of this tyranny during the Emergency. The forceful vasectomy under the government's Family planning programme ruined their lives. The doctors and the government were not interested in people's health or welfare. All they wanted was to achieve targets and conduct as many operations in a day as possible. Then the worst happened. A local leader who was taking care of these operations had a problem with the tailors so, to take his revenge, he got Om's testicles removed forever and Om was dragged to the operation room for the second time. "Om's pants were taken off for the second

time. A rag soaked in chloroform was gripped at his nose. He tore it briefly, then went limp. With a swift incision the doctor removed the testicles, sewed up the gash, and put a heavy dressing on it” (536). After the operation, when Ishvar checked on his nephew, he found his testicles missing. Highly upset with the series of events, he yelled around that Omprakash was castrated.

The two tailors after a few days of healing after the operation went to the police station to file a complaint against the doctor and the other authorities but it was very obvious that no one would even acknowledge their presence. The forced vasectomy under unhygienic circumstances led to Ishvar’s grave infection. Ishvar’s condition deteriorated day by day. There was swelling in his legs and unbearable pain continued. They went to see the doctor in a private hospital, away from the government people, with the condition he was suffering from and he was given a course of medicines to be followed for a couple of weeks. Although the medicines did help with the reduction in his body temperature but the condition of his legs were still the same. There was not any recovery and the reaction of the operation had reached his toes thus completely making him incapable to even stand on his legs and walk on his own. Ishvar’s legs had to be amputated because of the infection which left him useless now. He could not walk anymore, all thanks to Mrs. Gandhi’s Family Planning Programme and the way they were conducted. Ishvar had to be dragged in a handcart by Om and nothing could be more embarrassing for him. They decided to go back to the city because at least it was a safer place than the village where the people were mad with rage against each other. They had started feeling uncomfortable with all the tragedies which had happened in their lives and people were looking at them with disgust and even talking behind their back. So after a period of four months of hell in the village, they returned to the city. “The uncle-nephew duo returns to the city as beggars, with Om pulling Ishvar seated on a moving platform with wheels” (543). The Emergency had upturned their lives and they had become beggars now.

4. Conclusion

The two tailors have been subjected to the relentless and barbaric government policies under Mrs. Gandhi’s Emergency regime. The characters of the tailors had been shown as struggling since the very beginning of their lives in the city. First was the challenge to find a shelter and then after much endeavour when can find one, it is soon demolished under the government’s City Beautification Programme. This leads to the tailors sleeping on the streets. They eventually also find a job for themselves as tailors with a Parsi lady, Dina. This gives them some amount of peaceful lives but the thought of getting Omprakash married and going to their village for some time, completely capsize their lives. The tailors are a victim of the government’s Family Planning Programme thus wrecking their lives in all forms. Ishvar loses his legs and Omprakash his testicles which makes him no less than a eunuch. The misfortune strikes them forever and they are now beggars in the city from once being tailors. The two tailors fall victim to both the City Beautification Programme and the Family Planning Programme introduced by Mrs. Gandhi’s Government during the Emergency. Rohinton Mistry’s, thus, foregrounds the oppression of

common people by those in power in his current work and subsequently punctures the myth of welfare democratic states that work for the betterment of common citizens.

5. Availability of Data and Material

Information can be made available by contacting the corresponding author.

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Yashika Bisht is a research scholar pursuing Ph D in English at Amity Institute of English Studies and Research, Amity University, Noida, India. She pursued her Bachelor's in Arts degree from Garhwal University, Uttarakhand, and her Bachelors in Education from Amity Institute of Education, Amity University, Noida. She got a master's degree in English from Sri Dev Suman Uttarakhand University. Her area of research is based on Indian Writing in English and Feminism.



Dr. Shweta Saxena is an Assistant Professor (Grade-III) at Amity Institute of English Studies and Research, Amity University Uttar Pradesh, Noida. She was selected bly Public Service Commission, Uttar Pradesh to serve as Assistant Professor in Government Degree Colleges across Uttar Pradesh. She was awarded a Ph D in English from the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, IIT Kanpur. Her research interests span Contemporary Literary Theory, Indian Writing in English, British and American Literature and Twentieth Century Canadian Literature. She takes special interest in Postmodern Historiography which happens to be her research area in Doctoral Dissertation. She has one Book titled Historicity/Fictionality of History in Indian.