

**THE COMPARATIVE TREATMENT OF EMERGENCY IN NAYANTARA SAHGAL'S "RICH LIKE US" AND
SALMAN RUSHDI'S "MIDNIGHT CHILDREN"**

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ABSTRACT

The Indian writers were influenced by the freedom movement and the Gandhian ideology of nonviolence and Satyagraha which had shocked and surprised everyone changing the course of history itself. The Study depicts political events between sixties to early eighties. The novels selected are Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* and Nayanatara Sahgal's *Rich like Us*. These novels have revealed both the strengths and weaknesses of the Indian democracy. They also question the credibility of the new leaders and their decline of morality code. The political novels depict the political indifference of the general public which was due to poverty and illiteracy. Nayanatara Sahgal presents an insider's approach towards Emergency.

The study shows that the Emergency was not something that happened overnight, it was the consequence of the slow erosion of moral values which had set in, among the civil servants and the people at large, after Independence.

KEYWORDS: Imposition of Emergency, Bureaucracy, Corruption, Freedom Struggle, Reality of the Indian Political System, Gandhian Ideology, Patriotism.

INTRODUCTION

Though history and politics are interlinked, there is a difficulty in distinguishing between political and historical novels. Even if the novel is written about contemporary political events or about current political personalities, it may come under the label of *history* because present politics, political events, ideologies and personalities become a part of history. Another difference lies in the interpretation. It is mechanical to interpret a political novel as one portraying a political movement as most social problems have political dimensions. When we consider the scope of political novel in Indian writing in English, it is very wide. Since the Indian novel in English was born before independence, the freedom movement plays an integral part in the genre's development. In fact, it is possible to explore the connection between the growth of the freedom movement and the rise of Indian novel in English. The freedom movement in India was not just a political struggle, but an emotional experience for the Indians. Thus early Indian English novels were ideologically oriented which basically propoganded Gandhian ideology and patriotism. The emergency period was the most substantial assault on the liberal democratic nature of India since independence.

This Emergency is just what we needed. The trouble makers are in jail. An opposition is something we never needed. The way the country's being run now, with one person giving orders, and no one being allowed to make a fuss about it in the cabinet or in parliament, means things can go full steam ahead without delays and weighing pros and cons forever. Strikes are banned. It is going to be very good for business.¹

The Indian English political novels emerged before independence and it continued to flourish after independence. The study has limited itself to the selected novels of the post-independence phase. These novels belong to the category of non – ideological novels which depict wars with China, Pakistan and Bangladesh, Mrs Indira Gandhi becoming Prime Minister, bifurcation of the Congress in 1969, imposition of Emergency etc.

The contemporary writers in Indian English do not inhabit a fixed space and also write from multiple perspectives. The endless, versatile, complex, rich and problematic entity of Indian writing in English encompasses diverse subjects within its widened horizon. They have appropriated the standard British English and made it their own, infusing within it native idioms, market slang, colloquialisms of metropolitans, classical jargons, references to the Hindu pantheon etc. The modified English, over which the Indian writers have mastered, is now used for an unbiased presentation of the Indian reality to reveal the 'true' situation to the readers all over the world.

Emergency in India is a rosy, reforming, revolutionary experience and an enriching experiment in democracy under the existing circumstances; and its flowering success is full justification of the seed planted by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi at the lightest moment in history.²

The Emergency became the main theme of the political novelists. The study shows that During Emergency, common man was denied even his right to procreation.

THE MAIN STUDY

Nayantara Sahgal is the cousin of Mrs Indira Gandhi so she presents an insider's approach towards Emergency. Sahgal has the honour of being the first Indian English woman novelist dealing with political themes. She received two prestigious awards for her sixth novel, *Rich like Us*, published in 1985. She was awarded Sinclair Prize for Fiction and the prestigious Sahitya Akademi Award. During Emergency, she resigned from Akademi's Advisory Board in protest because her suggestion that the Board should pass a resolution to condemn the censorship of press and imprisonment without trial went unheeded. Ironically, the same Akademi honoured her for her novel which attacks Emergency. One of the most important events in the post- independence Indian political scene was the declaration of Emergency which lasted from June 1975 to March 1977. As Jasbir Jain observes:

Rich like Us offers no easy solutions to mankind problems on the contrary it challenges all known solutions . . . finally Rich like Us is about the complex nature of reality.³

Rich like Us, set in 1975, fearlessly presents an account of the harassment caused to people during Emergency. *Rich like Us* is the story of the Emergency from the view point of two characters Sonali and Rose. Sonali, one of the main characters in the novel, thinks of an appropriate parallel right at the beginning of the novel - the story of *The Emperor's clothes*.

We were all taking part in a thinly disguised masquerade, preparing the stage for 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 very silent indeed. No one wanted trouble. So long as it didn't touch us, we played along, pretending the Empress's new clothes were beautiful. To put it charitably, we have being realistic. We knew we were up against a power we couldn't handle, individually or collectively.⁴

Nayantara Sahgal's writing of Emergency has a feminist attitude. In the novel, her female characters are strongly portrayed and the effects of Emergency on them are focused upon. Nayantara Sahgal's *Rich like Us* deals with the effects of Emergency on the middle classes. The novel too portrays Emergency but focuses on other aspects. While writing about the dictatorship during Emergency, Nayantara Sahgal is criticizing the beginning of the capitalist turn in Mrs Indira Gandhi's policies and

her abusive behaviour in 1975-77, regarding censorship, imprisonment of political leaders and massive sterilization campaigns. If we look at the reasons for the declaration of Emergency, one of the primary factors was the verdict of the Allahabad High Court. Raj Narain, who had been defeated in Parliamentary election by Mrs Indira Gandhi, lodged cases of election fraud and use of state machinery for election purposes by her. On 12th June 1975, Justice Jagmohanlal Sinha of the Allahabad High Court found the Prime Minister guilty. The court declared her election cancelled and unseated her from the Lok Sabha. This conviction prevented Mrs Indira Gandhi of running for or holding any elective office for a period of six years. Some serious charges such as bribing voters and election malpractices were dropped and she was held responsible for misusing the government machinery and found guilty on charges such as using the state police to build a dais, availing the services of a government officer, Yashpal Kapoor, during the elections and use of electricity from the state electricity department. Strikes in labor and trade unions, student unions and government unions had swept across the country. Protests led by J. P. Narayan, Raj Narain, Satyendra Narayan Sinha and Morarji Desai flooded the streets of Delhi close to the Parliament and the Prime Minister's residence. The regular efforts of Raj Narain were praised and it took over four years to finally pass judgment against Mrs Indira Gandhi. The Emergency period started overnight. Politicians and newspapers demanded resignation of Mrs Indira Gandhi and organised a huge demonstration against her on 25th June, 1975. On 26th June, Mrs Indira Gandhi's elite force arrested the political leaders of the opposition. Hours later, she proclaimed the state of National Emergency which included the suspension of basic civil rights and tight censorship over press. As per the 28th and 29th amendments to the Constitution, she excluded herself from impending legal charges, declaring this amendment immune to the Supreme Court review. Nayantara Sahgal wrote about Mrs Gandhi's rule making clear their divergence of views concerning the nation. It is worth quoting the Introduction to Sahgal's book on Mrs Indira Gandhi, to settle their divergence in point of view, as Sahgal herself phrases it:

The essence of Indian politics before her (Mrs Gandhi's) time had been diversity of opinion, Institutes and channels for its expression, and a wholehearted acceptance of the nurture of these diverse strands as essential to the democratic faith and system (...). With Mrs Gandhi, this atmosphere, along with the political structures it involved, the climate of debate and dissent it had encouraged (...) began to be eroded. A simple formula of for-and-against, either-or replaced it.⁵

With this backdrop, the novel opens in Dev's house, where he and his wife are entertaining a foreign guest, Neuman, a collaborator in the proposed Happyola factory and they have money making

alliances between them. Neuman has come to India in search of a market and Dev is the Indian collaborator.

Rich like Us portrays a nation which once embraced the hallowed Gandhian ideals and which in modern times has repudiated with a vengeance, as it were, Gandhi and all that he stood for in his life and politics. One can compare Dev and Neuman to Hari Mohan and Somnath in Nayantara Sahgal's *This Time of Morning* dealing with the important wings of the nation - the politicians and the bureaucrats, failing at their moral and professional responsibilities. The politicians Hari Mohan and Somanath are corrupt, greedy and unscrupulous. Somnath and Hari Mohan like Dev and Neuman mould the entire political and bureaucratic machinery for the advantage of their business alliance. Dev and Neuman are waiting for Ravi Kachru, an important bureaucrat, part of the conveyor belt that had delivered the cash to the Minister of Industry, relatively minor price in terms of big investment and the returns expected from it. The English administrator is applauded for his reform, which has ended **a system demoralizing in its effect on the living, a revolting system of suicide and murder.**⁶

Neuman observes the Indian obsession for imported things. He feels the anonymity of Dev's house which is without the echo of things past or things to come. Contrast to Dev is Sonali, an IAS officer, who has grown up in an idealistic world. Sonali can be compared to Bharati from R. K. Narayan's *Waiting for the Mahatma*. Bharati is a freedom fighter and a staunch follower of Mahatma Gandhi. After independence, she is released from jail and she leaves for Noakhali with Gandhi to restore peace in the region as private interests can wait before national concerns. Bharati symbolizes the Gandhian model of love, non-violence and freedom. Bharati can be compared to Sonali, who is working under the dictatorial regime of Emergency and faces problems courageously like Bharati. Both have firm faith in Gandhian ideology. They stick to their principles and suffer in their lives. Sonali is unable to accommodate herself to the new requirements of Emergency. She rejects the application for the setting up of the imported Happyola drink factory by Dev and Neuman, supported by the Minister of Industry, purely on economic grounds.

For the analysis of this novel, the provisions of Emergency and civil service conditions were found appropriate. Article 309 of the Indian Constitution illustrates the *conditions of service* for the civil servants. It states that demotion is a punishment for the malpractices by bureaucrats.

Whereas, Sonali is demoted as she is unable to accommodate herself to the new requirements of Emergency. In her case, fundamental rights are flaunted and denied. There is an implied comparison with Dev's method of working and the new political control of business deals. People like Ram and his father were getting rare, as if they belonged to extinct species. O.P. Mathur opines that:

Rich like Us is perhaps the only novel which subsumes the horror of the emergency in the consciousness of human beings affected by them. ⁷

Dev views Emergency from the point of view of business. The judiciary and legislature have lost their powers due to the provisions of Emergency under article 353 (b) thereby the legislature has no right to make laws. This is beneficial for people like Dev.

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Ravi Kachru is intelligent than Dev, shares with Dev indifference to all the moral concerns. Kachru had overnight become the right hand and the left leg of the Prime Minister and her household. Only partly because he was a Kashmiri and next door to being her kith and kin. The novel operates simultaneously on two levels, the literal and the figurative or symbolic. At the literal level, the novel is the story of Emergency as seen from the viewpoint of two main characters, Rose and Sonali. The novel is a sustained allegory of modern India, especially of its relationship with Britain. Nayantara Sahgal is hopeful about man's potentialities. The Emergency is graphically painted: trade unions crushed, news blacked out, bureaucracy politicized. Delegations of teachers, lawyers, school children, entrepreneurs and others pass through the motions of praising the leader for timely wisdom.

The novel is rich in political parallels. *The Madam* in the novel who has brought in the Emergency is Mrs. Indira Gandhi and the son who uses the official power to produce small car project is Sanjay Gandhi. Nayantara Sahgal points out how politics of Emergency encroaches on the right to life. She had used Emergency to end all constitutional challenges to her personal rule and to cripple the challenging institutions. Nayantara Sahgal realistically portrays Emergency and the cult of family rule, casteism, elitism, black money and various immoral practices her inner harmony during the period of Emergency. This could be interpreted as escapism from reality since during Emergency everyone was trying to escape from the truth that it was no Emergency at all but a fake demonstration of Emergency. Everybody has the freedom to find peace and even Emergency has not trampled this right. Mrs. Indira Gandhi is analogous to Summer Singh, who under Emergency had uprooted the very foundations of democracy and had thrown off the Gandhian ideals of non – violence. *Rich like Us* is important for more Reasons than one: it comments on the political situation

which has colonial overtones, it analyses the flow in the native tradition and it justifies the moral struggle so important and significant for survival of the human being.

On the other hand, Salman Rushdie had a special perspective in choosing children born at midnight in his novel *Midnight's Children*. Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, published in 1981, took the literary world by storm. Rushdie made extravagant use of myth, oral tradition, and different versions and ideas of history. He aimed at providing an opportunity to the members of marginalized groups or national minorities to place themselves centre stage in the drama of national history, rather than feeling the pressure to subsume them in the mainstream, official version. He thus dared to challenge the official version of *History*. As Ron Shepherd puts it:

Midnight's Children differs from earlier fiction in that most of the usual ground rules associated with the older form of fiction are broken: the unities of time and place and characters are, at best, unstable: the narrative fluctuates uncertainly between first and third person: ordinary notions of fictional realism are subverted, natural law becomes unnatural or supernatural even though the novel is not in any straight forward sense religious or metaphysical, the novel is full of cryptic clues, archaic utterances.... It is a novel of signs and gestures and sleight of hand narrated with a passion for narrating rather than for clarifying meaning.⁹

The novel runs into three parts. Part first presents itself with the events that took place in India from 1915 to 1947. Part second deals with the childhood of Saleem Sinai, the protagonist. Part third is primarily on Emergency operations and brutalities in India during the seventies. The novel portrays India through the eye of a young man, Saleem born at the stroke of the hour of Indian independence, 15th August, 1947. The novel depicts India with its ups and downs, films, mythology, politics, and terror of Emergency, religion, marriage ceremony, friendship and enmity. The novel portrays the life and experience of the three generations of Sinai family, living in Srinagar, Amritsar, Agra, Bombay and Karachi. It is an epic in the sense that it tries to describe or contain an India whose stories are too innumerable to be contained. William Walsh points out:

The novel is a piece of 'fiction - faction', by one born in India but settled abroad who tries to recreate his homeland, mixing memory and desire, fact and fantasy reality and vision, time and timelessness.¹⁰

As the novel progresses, he witnesses and participates in the major events of modern Indian history. The most significant of these is the Bangladesh war, where Saleem moves with his family. After most of his relatives are killed, he loses his memory. When Mrs Indira Gandhi pronounces that due to Emergency all the *Midnight's Children* must be sterilized, Saleem is castrated. She does so because no more children with special powers would be born and there will be no one to challenge her

absolute authority. Saleem's troubles dispirited him and depleted his physical strength. He ends up working at the pickle factory and waiting for death. Though Saleem narrates the story and participates in the events, he becomes for some days invisible while being transported from Bangladesh to India. Touching India, he becomes visible. He is brought back into India by Paravti. Prof. O. P. Mathur maintains:

Saleem Sinai who is the embodiment of a supreme moment of history, a crystallization of an evolving mood, a distillation of a vision nostalgic, critical and philosophical, is a camera eye, which is itself cracked and fragmented, with, as the novelist remarks, some of its fragments missing. But in spite of it, or perhaps because of it, he is able to project what may be called a sort of prismatic vision of reality, partial, fissured and fragmented, but highly absorbing and deeply meaningful.¹¹

Emergency is declared and people are forcibly castrated. When all the *Midnight's Children* are also caught and tortured, he gave way to his grief in the following address to the *Midnight's Children*. It should be noted that after 1978, it is impossible to issue proclamation of Emergency on the grounds of internal *disturbance* for the words *internal disturbance* have been substituted by the words *armed rebellion* by the Constitution Act, 1978 (44th amendment). When one reviews these provisions and basics related to the Emergency, one finds that Mrs Indira Gandhi had not only misused the provisions of Emergency but had also taken care that nobody uses these provisions in the future. In fact it was no Emergency at all but dictatorship and she was the only privileged one to use absolute powers. We find that neither Saleem nor the other characters in the novel retain any right to freedom or equality during the Emergency. In many ways independence only meant a change of colonial, economic and political arrangements rather than a true liberation. India's history since 1947 has been an experiment in democracy that underwent new changes in the twenty- two month disaster of Emergency. This resulted in a sense of displacement which was experienced by the characters of the novel and the average Indians. Mrs Indira Gandhi is a symbol of the destructive forces rampant in the Indian politics especially in the mid-1970s: the India of the Emergency. Mrs Gandhi tended to identify herself with the nation completely and therefore looked upon personal threats to her as constituting threats to the nation. Faced with opposition and a political threat, with the arrival of Mrs Gandhi and the state of Emergency, Rushdie fuses the two narratives with a single predicament. Emergency ended up all the values of the freedom movement in India.

Midnight's Children is one such novel that is about India in all its varied form. It reveals an India that ***must be felt, seen, and reacted to in all its varied textures, overlapping mythologies, fabulous fantasies and harsh realities***¹²

CONCLUSION

Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1980) and Nayantara Sahgal's *Rich like Us* (1985), published soon after Indira Gandhi's Emergency (1975–77), offer memorable and critical representations of that watershed event. Both novels portray the suppression of parliamentary democracy and civil rights under the Emergency as an acute crisis in Indian history. Both the works share some common traits in their treatment of history.

Both also depict the oppressive conditions for political dissidents and the poor in Indira Gandhi's regime, invoking its repression and corruption, its bulldozing of slums, and its forced sterilizations. By making the Emergency central to the plot and structure of their stories about postcolonial India and its people, the novels instigate queries that push beyond fiction, operating on the levels of historiography and political consciousness.

Midnight's Children and *Rich Like Us* present characters and voices that demand answers to such questions—and construct implied audiences that must consider them seriously in the realms of both fiction and reality. By tracing politicization, calling for a Gandhian struggle against the Emergency, and drawing attention to the daily emergencies of suffering subalterns, the study asks its implied and real audiences to bring the derailed nation back on track.

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