

Narrating the Nation: Toward a De-gendered Balance in *A Fine Balance*

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Abstract. In *A Fine Balance* by Rohinton Mistry, the main characters move toward a prescribed reduction of their status as citizens of a nation. In this reduction, they lose their rights, identity and sustainability which culminate in the symbolic reduction of their gendered balance. The political situation changes to the State of the Emergency under the rule of Mrs. Indira Gandhi which results in the imbalance imposed on the narratives of the nationhood. The Emergency influences the life of the nation to the extent that it degrades and reduces the nation to a mere plaything of the discourse of power. In this respect, under the Twenty Point Program agenda of the Emergency, sterilization occurs which leaves one of the characters ungendered. Hence, this study serves to expand the symbolic castration to the life of the nation during the Emergency as it exposes the relationship between power and gender in a state of lawlessness.

Keywords: Emergency, nation, Parsi, India.

1. Introduction:

This chapter aims to explore the narration of the nation from the perspective of gender and power relations in the Indian nation during a period known as the Emergency. It will analyze the political implications of the Emergency, and the consequences of Partition on the life of the Indian nation as narrated by Rohinton Mistry in his novel, *A Fine Balance*. Mistry, by using historical facts, presents us with the events that happened in the postcolonial India in 1947 particularly the state of the Emergency under the reign of the then Indian Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi. After the colonial period, the Indian society undergoes changes which are highly significant in the nation-building process. The two major events in the post-independence period of Indian history are the partition of India in 1947 and the Emergency between the years 1975 and 1977. In his novel, Mistry explores the political implication of these events on the lives of the Indian nation. His characters include the marginalized members of Indian society such as the lower castes, Parsis, Muslims, Sikhs and the poor who were often neglected by the leaders of state. In Mistry's representation, the image of India is depicted in terms of the hardships caused by the sinister happenings of the Emergency which suspended the democratic rights of the nation.

The suspension of the democratic rights of the nation, the censorship of the press and the imprisonment of the opposition leaders by the Emergency created an imbalance in the political life of the nation. According to Peter Morey, the inception of the Emergency was the result of an economic crisis which happened in the early 1970s. Thus, the Emergency brought Indira Gandhi as the national champion of the 1971 India-Pakistan war to becoming a despot and tyrant three and a half years later. The economic crisis resulted from the drought that led into poor harvests, the OPEC oil crisis which was followed by high inflation (about thirty percent by the middle of 1974) in India (98-9).

In Mistry's *A Fine Balance*, the main characters move toward a prescribed reduction of their status as citizens of a nation. In this reduction, they lose their rights, identity and sustainability which culminate in the symbolic reduction of their gendered balance. The political situation of the Emergency under the rule of Mrs. Indira Gandhi imposes an imbalance on the narratives of nationhood. The Emergency influences the life of the nation to the extent that it degrades and reduces the nation to a mere plaything of the discourses of power.

In this regard, under the Twenty Point Program agenda of the Emergency, sterilization occurs which leaves one of the characters castrated and degendered. Hence, this study serves to expand this physical castration to the symbolic castration of the life of the nation during Emergency as it exposes the ambivalences of power and gender in a state of lawlessness.

Mistry as a writer of the Parsi diaspora in India, presents a wider canvas of the nation in his second novel, *A Fine Balance*, which interweaves the life of the subaltern, the marginalized and the poor into the narrative of the nation. There are four main characters who come from different social backgrounds where they exemplify the marginalized voices of the Indian nation whose lives are disputed and shaped by the Emergency. Dina, a Parsi widow, lives in a small flat in Bombay and it's here that the other characters merge into her life because of the economic forces. Ishvar and Omprakash come from their village to the city to find jobs as tailors. They belong to the Chamar caste, who are untouchables, and as a result of their oppression by the upper-castes, they are sent to learn tailoring in the town to change their situation. In fact, what brings them to the town and then to the city is economic dynamism. Maneck Kolah comes from a mountain village from northern India to Bombay in order to get an education due to his father's failure in business. They all come to Dina's flat and a bond of friendship, a sense of family creates among them. The narratives of the four protagonists of the novel interconnect in Dina's flat from where the nation reconnects itself "as one soul" despite the discordance created by the Emergency. The economic, social and political situation of the nation brings them together into a family. Besides, their gender roles are blurred and Dina is treated like an equal companion. Unfortunately, the misuses and abuses of the state of the Emergency distort their balance which is reflected as their life is ruined by a sequence of events. Under the sterilization program run by the government, Omprakash is castrated and Ishvar is amputated. As a result, Dina loses her business and flat and becomes dependent on her brother, Nusswan. And Maneck commits suicide at the end of the novel. D'Cruz observes that "the political chaos of the Emergency intervenes like an uncontrollable and irrational force to frustrate the personal quests for a *modus vivendi*" (58).

2. Toward a De-gendered Balance in *A Fine Balance*:

The castration of Omprakash, however, is symbolic because the whole movement of the plot of the novel revolves around deprivation, and confiscation of the characters' existence by the hegemonic narrative and discourse of power. It should be noted that Om's castration happens almost at the end of the novel. Here, castration happens under the guise of the sterilization program conducted by the administration of the Emergency. The sexual implication of the action which is targeted mainly at men leaves Omprakash neither a man nor a woman as it strips him of what society considers to be the identifying characteristics of male and female gender performativity. Hence, the situation grants him a degendered position of less than a human being and less than a normal citizen. In fact, it is not only Omprakash who is humiliated but the whole Indian nation is involved in this ambivalent positioning during the Emergency by the hegemonic discourse of power and nationalism.

Mistry never mentions Mrs. Gandhi's name throughout the novel, but he makes clear references to the period. Here, the fact that a woman is a Prime Minister is highly significant for the gender politics of the nation. Under her rule, the sterilization program by the Emergency mostly targeted men. In the novel, the situation of women in the nation-building process and their gender role are ambivalent. According to Nira Yuval-Davis, "on the one hand, they often symbolize the collective unity, honour and *raison d'être* of specific national and ethnic projects, like going to war. On the other hand, however, they are often excluded from the collective 'we' of the body politic, and retain an object rather than a subject position" (47). As Mistry depicts in the novel, women are the objects of manipulation and subordination by the patriarchal culture. In fact, their gender role reduces them in society but the Emergency adds insult to injury. In this context, the female characters in Mistry's novel contribute to our understanding of gender politics in the nation, which I am now discussing in detail.

The main female protagonist, Dina Dalal, comes from a Parsi background, a minority community in India. She loses her parents at a very young age and Nusswan, her domineering brother, takes care of her. He is a prejudiced kind of person who views women as inferior. Hence, Dina is under his control regarding her freedom and womanhood. He forces her to give up her matriculation studies and do housework instead on

the belief that a woman's role is only domestic and a good marriage is the best choice for her. Thus, he often brings home his friends who might cast an eye on his sister and might want to marry her. In a way, he tries to control her future.

Dina, under the control of her brother, suffers a lot during her teenage years. She is sexually harassed. Nusswan is an authoritative figure of the house and so, she is to obey him. When she aims to cut her long tresses short, he firmly says no to her. She cuts it anyway but this comes at a price. He beats her badly and says that she looks like a "loose woman". Then, he tears her clothes and takes her into the bathroom for a sacred wash. Mistry presents the scene as such: "He stepped back and flung a mugful of cold water at her from the bucket. Shivering, she stared defiantly at him, her nipples stiffening. He pinched one, hard, and she flinched. 'Look at you with your little breasts staring to grow. You think you are a woman already. I should cut them right off, along with your wicked tongue'"(24). After that, he eyes her strangely staring at her pubic hair and this makes her afraid. So, she decides the only way is to submit to what he wants her to be.

As a woman, Dina wishes to be independent and hopes she gains it by marrying Rustom Dalal. However, Rustom dies three years later and her independence is ruined. Having lost her husband, she once again takes refuge in her brother's house as his housekeeper. Then, Dina in an attempt for independence, returns to her flat and by the help of her relatives, Shirin Aunty Darab Uncle, learns tailoring and leads her independent life for a while until the Emergency approaches. Her failing eyesight makes him hire two tailors to do the tailoring. That is where Om and Ishvar enter her life. Her struggle for independence in a patriarchal society leads nowhere as the state of the Emergency ruins her independence and reduces her to a maid in the house.

Moreover, the reduction of the characters during the Emergency testifies to role of power politics in the country. Narayan decides to participate in the election to claim the rights which belong to the lower castes. When his father, Dukhi, advises him not to waste his time and life in the election, he argues that "life without dignity is worthless" (144). Elections here provide the political mobilization in the distribution of power which Narayan attempts to join in order to change his positioning as an untouchable and to assert his forgotten rights. As a consequence, he and two others are punished by Thakur Dharamsi, an upper-caste tyrant:

Throughout the day, at intervals, they were flogged as they hung naked by their ankles from the branches of a banyan tree. Drifting in and out of consciousness, their screams grew faint [...] In the distance, in the far field, his men urinated on the three inverted faces. Semiconscious, the parched mouths were grateful for the moisture, licking the trickle with feeble urgency [...] in the evening, after the ballot boxes were taken away, burning coals were held to the three men's genitals, then stuffed into their mouths. Their screams were heard through the village until their lips and tongues melted away. The still, silent bodies were taken down from the tree. When they began to stir, the ropes were transformed from their ankles to their necks, and the three were hanged. The bodies were displayed in the village square. (146)

In his description, Mistry represents the harshest scenes of injustice to depict the silencing of the lower castes under Emergency. In their torture, the burning coals are held to their genitals and then to their mouth. First, their genitals, as the marks of their sexuality and gender performativity, are injured and then their mouth, as their narrative function of the nation, is stuffed with the burning coal. It all serves to silence and deprive them of their identity as citizens of a nation. Ian Almond opines that Mistry re-orientalizes the novel by including the Yeatsian idea of the East which is the stoicism presented in the text. It is reflected in the silence within the description of injustices (214). On the contrary, the silences embody the loudest protests to the violence embedded in the text. Also, Almond observes that "almost as if, in order to represent man's inhumanity to man, language itself has to become inhuman. In this sense, the language of *A Fine Balance* almost takes on a cinematic quality—a silent film bereft of dialogue and music, a straightforward succession of painful images" (207). The inhumanity is the result of distorting society's balance in accordance with Thakur's machinations. The principle of balance, according to the tradition of the caste system, should be maintained. Here, D'Cruz observes that "the Thakur ordered the torching of Narayan's home and the murder of his family in a bid to root out the aspiration of Untouchables for democratic equality" (64).

Furthermore, the state dictates its hegemony by using the discourse of nationalism which is intensified even at places of entertainment like cinemas to establish the ideology of the Emergency. Maneck and Om are stopped and made to listen to the national anthem being played when they along with, the members of audience, rush to the exit door at the end of the film. A squad of Shiv Sena¹, the nationalist extremists, blocks the door and forces the audience by warnings like: “RESPECT THE NATIONAL ANTHEM! YOUR MOTHERLAND NEEDS YOU DURING THE EMERGENCY! PATRIOTISM IS A SACRED DUTY!” (281). The ambivalence of nation and gender relationship lies in the fact that the nation is the property of men, a male-gendered identity but the discourse of power relates nation to the motherland which is a female-gendered identity. The nationalistic discourse feminizes the nation as Motherland to show that it needs protection. It testifies to the fact that “women are figured as the biological and cultural reproducers of the nation and as “pure” and “modest”, and men defend the national image and protect the nation’s territory, women’s “purity” and “modesty” and the “moral code” (Mayer 10). Thus, Motherland represents the nation with women as its “social and biological womb and the men as its protectors” (Mayer 10). On the other hand, the statement accentuates patriotism which is related to the state not to the nation. The roots of nationalism, according to Khilnani, is that “nationalism was the politics of an urban elite that presumed itself entitled to negotiate with the British and speak on behalf of the country’s villages” (125). So, in fact, nationalism as a policy to unite the country should speak on behalf of minority groups residing in villages where most of India’s populations live. With regard to nationalism, Bhabha suggests that history provokes a sense of homogenous nationalism for the people but the reality is not like that:

It is precisely in reading between these borderlines of the nation-space that we can see how the concept of the ‘people’ emerges within a range of discourses as a double narrative movement. The people are not simply historical events or parts of a patriotic body politic. They are also a complex rhetorical strategy of social reference: their claim to be representative provokes a crisis within the process of signification and discursive address. We then have a contested conceptual territory where the nation’s people must be thought in double-time; the people are the historical ‘objects’ of a nationalistic pedagogy, giving the discourse an authority that is based on the pre-given or constituted historical origin in the *past*; the people are also the ‘subjects’ of a process of signification that must erase any prior or originary presence of the nation-people to demonstrate the prodigious, living principles of the people as contemporaneity: as that sign of the *present* through which national life is redeemed and iterated as a reproductive process. (145)

It clearly reflects the ambivalent discourse of power during the Emergency which utilizes nationalism as it relies on the past not the present situation of the country which entails all the minority groups. In contrast, Rashna B. Singh believes that, “the cultural space of the nation in Mistry’s novel is not only multifarious but also transgressive; it subverts the narrative of the nation as the Hindutva movement tells it, a narrative that many Hindus seem to have imbibed uncritically” (42). It means that it accentuates hybridity to negotiate the nation space. As a result, the state of Emergency being incapable of positioning its measures in society relies on the enforcement of patriotic ideology to justify its policies.

In the novel, the great impact of sterilization is shown on the life of Ishvar and Om when they return to their hometown. Thakur Dharamsi is in charge of the Family Planning. He abuses and misuses his power over the townsfolk. During a market day, the police arrest people by force, among them Ishvar and Om, and take them to the sterilization camps. They go through the forced sterilization, in which Om’s testicles are removed by the order of Thakur, and Ishvar’s legs are amputated due to the unsterilized operation. In fact, the symbolic castration aims to repress productivity, power and the libidinal drive of the nation in order to suspend their democratic rights. Suspension of the democratic rights by the Emergency has turned a blind eye to justice as well, so that when they complain to the police, the poor are sent to the Family Planning like wanderers in a strange land. There, the doctor says: “if we start believing you, then all the eunuchs in the country will come *dancing to us*, blaming us for their condition, trying to get money out of us” (italic mine

¹ According to Khilnani, “the Shiv Sena, the ‘army of Shivaji’, took its name from a seventeenth-century Maratha warlord who fought successfully against the Mughals. It was founded in the mid-1960s as an anti-immigrant party, dedicated to employment and educational opportunities for Bombay’s Marathi-speakers. It has internalized the nationalist faith in the magic of names so deeply that it has renamed not merely the parks and streets, but the entire city, Mumbai (141).

540). The reference to the dance as an entertainment reminds us of the existence of a community in the Indian nation called Hijras whose gendered identity is ambivalent. According to Serena Nanda's description, "the *hijra*, an institutionalized third gender role in India, is "neither male or female", containing elements of both. The *hijra* are commonly believed by the larger society to be intersexed, impotent men, who undergo emasculation in which all or part of the genitals are removed" (237). The reality of the situation is that the Emergency attempts to produce degendered subjects like Hijras, whose occupation is entertainment and who are uncritical of politics. Here, Doreen D'Cruz points out that Mistry by comparing the oppressive policies of the Emergency to the caste system forms an analogous parallel to the draconian measures of the fascist state. Ishvar and Om are taken to the construction site as slaves of the Emergency in the manner of prisoners in concentration camps during the Jewish holocaust. At last, the genocide happens to Ishvar and Om which leaves one crippled and the other castrated (67). Moreover, it reminds me of the eunuchs and king's fools of ancient times who were the most trusted figures in the court by the kings due to their physical weakness and impotence which resulted also in their political impotence. In fact, the sterilization program by the Emergency symbolically reflects the ideology behind its actions to be the political impotence of the nation.

In a nutshell, through the suspension of its democratic rights, the Indian nation was reduced by the infamous Emergency to being mere entertainers. Mistry in his depiction of the Indian nation disseminates the history of the nation under the disguise of the sterilization program which targeted to stand against justice, solidarity, individuality and democratic rights. He represents nation and gender from the perspective of the subaltern to show the influences of politics on the life of the nation. The state of Emergency in the process of feminization degenders the nation to assert its power.

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