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Darkness at dawn, the declaration: Exploring Emergency through *Midnight's Children* and
The Great Indian Novel

Darkness at dawn, the declaration, this paper of mine will be presenting the dawn of June 25, 1975, the day on which internal Emergency was declared by the ruling Congress party government reducing the Union government of India into a unitary government, its tyrannical attitude ceasing the rights of people, the freedom of press resulting into mass scale rebellion by the opposition and finally ending the totalitarian government in 1977 after facing the oppression of almost nineteen months. This was the period of India's democracy when democracy was replaced by autocracy and I will be viewing this dark era with two novels of contemporary India presenting political thinking in literature, *Midnight's Children* (2006) by Salman Rushdie and *The Great Indian Novel* (1993) by Shashi Tharoor. An interesting parallel drawn between the Modern India's Emergency of 1975 and Ancient India's Mahabharata is what we see in Shashi Tharoor's novel. I will be including references from several newspaper clippings and speeches of that time and also television shows showcased much later after the Emergency presenting the realities and the plight of people who were left on the margins. People were not only crippled by their actions but also by their thoughts which reduced them to mere subjects.

Keywords: Emergency, Partition, Tyranny, Violence, Trauma, memory.

“At the stroke of midnight hour, when the world sleeps, India will awake to life and freedom” speaks Pandit Jawahar Lal Nehru in his famous “Tryst with Destiny” speech in the

Constituent Assembly of India on the eve of India's independence on August 14, 1947. This was the dawn to which the people of India woke up to a new independent life. On the other hand, there was one more speech and declaration almost twenty eight years after the independence in the voice of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi on the All India Radio broadcast of June 26, 1975 which stated the following:

I'm sure you are all conscious of the deep and widespread conspiracy, which has been brewing ever since I began to introduce certain progressive measures of benefit to the common man and woman of India, certain persons have gone to the length of inciting our armed forces to mutiny and our police to rebel.. How can any Government worth its name stand by and allow the country's stability to be imperilled? The actions of the few are endangering the rights of the vast majority.⁽¹⁾

According to the AIR broadcast, Mrs. Gandhi felt suspension of fundamental rights against the rebellious spirit of people to be the solution for the endangering of rights of people who were reduced merely to subjects from citizens after the proclamation of Emergency. The opposition leader Jayprakash Narayan called the nineteen months of Emergency as one of India's "blackest hours" who was considered the chief conspirator provoking mass scale rebellion and anti-congress campaigns. Indira Gandhi led Congress government faced intense pressure in the wake of the 'Poorna Swaraj'(Total Revolution) led by Jayaprakash Narayan and the decision in the Raj Narain case triggered widespread for Indira Gandhi's resignation. The language of Article 352 of the Constitution of India was invoked to assert that the vocal and sizeable political opposition contributes to the justification of authoritarian rule of the Union Government. The government proceeded to unleash a propaganda campaign that further justified the imposition of public discipline by citing the need to tackle corruption and inefficiency in society for advancing the avowed objectives of distributive justice and development.

Suspension of civic and fundamental rights of citizens, imposition of censorship and arrest of prominent political leaders were the three pillars which independent India witnessed during its nineteen months of darkness. One of the oldest esteemed newspaper of India, *The Hindu*

stated, 'President Proclaims National Emergency', 'security of India threatened by Internal disturbances', 'preventive arrests: press censorship imposed'. *The Indian Herald*, another newspaper on June 26, 1975 stated, 'Emergency Declared', JP, Morarji, Advani, Asoka Mehta and Vajpayee arrested'⁽²⁾. Such statements by newspapers were probably the last one as after this, censorship was imposed on the print and electronic media. *.Diwali, 1975*, a poem by Nirankar Dev Sewak shows the woes of people after their leaders were arrested, "A festival of lights that cannot reach beyond that single gate to light a neighbour's house. When the Prakash (addressed to Jayprakash Naryan, the loved leader of the people demanding corruption free government) is imprisoned in a solitary cell all houses become prisons.. What illumination can Diwali bring this year?"⁽³⁾ In the episodes of *Pradhanmantri* of ABVP news channel by Shekhar Kapoor, it shows how the information and broadcasting minister Mr. I.K Gujral was compelled by Mr. Sanjay Gandhi to present the items of radio to be aired after being filtered from his office desk which was wholly unconstitutional. Censorship was imposed for the first time in India by promulgating a censorship order dated June 26, 1975 under Rule 48 of the Defense of India Rules. Quotations from Mahatma Gandhi, J. L Nehru and Rabindranath Tagore were banned. The only two newspapers and their editors who surfaced over the criticisms of the traitor's government were *The Indian Express* and the *Statesman*. The foreign newspapers played an important role in publishing critical material about the Emergency and some editors of the *The Times*, *Newsweek* and BBC were even expelled from India for their controversial reporting against the government. For the press, the Emergency was a cruel reminder that the State can snatch its freedom arbitrarily. Hence, soon after the Emergency ended and there were relaxations in censorship provisions on the eve of 6th Lok Sabha elections in 1977, the media got its breathing space and eventually emerged as the watch of democracy. The Press Council of India was formed whose main aim was to safeguard the freedom of the press and to maintain and improve the standards of newspapers and news agencies in the country.

Black Ordinance, a translated poem by G. Nagaraj Mullur speaks about the midnight declaration of Emergency on June 25, 1975 :

Hear! Hear! Hear

The black ordinance

Of the Durga of Delhi:

‘Water shall not flow!

The sun and the moon shall not shine!

The birds shall not sing!’

Friends, my friends, just disappeared

Behind bars,

While the prison walls stood with sealed lips.

The stars of the black sky knew the truth.

But they were afraid!

India, my India,

Has become a kingdom of darkness,

With widows, orphans

And those who have lost their lovers.

Silence

Has frozen into a song

That burns

In the dark bosoms of dark people⁽⁴⁾

The above poem is the saga of that dawn of June 26, 1975 when India woke up paralysed both physically and mentally. Internal Emergency was declared at midnight by President Fakhruddin Ali Ahmad by the advice of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. Independent India was once again facing that authoritarian rule but this time irony of the situation was, it was facing oppression by its own elected government and moreover, by people’s loved prime minister Indira Gandhi, addressed as ‘Durga of Delhi’ by the poet. It was the situation of absolutism practiced by the government as and the poet says silence became the new voice of the people. “Indira is India and India is Indira” says Rushdie in his novel *Midnight’s Children* ⁽⁵⁾. There were end number of arrests of politicians who dared turned finger on her. The mastermind behind all this was Sanjay Gandhi who started his five point programme and his ultimate aim was to achieve them: Each one Teach one-- to achieve complete literacy; Family Planning--

for a prosperous future; Plant Trees-- for ecological balance; Abolish Dowry-- to end a social evil; Eradicate Casteism-- to destroy social prejudice. The brutal of all was the mass forced sterilization, from an eighteen year old to a sixty year old man and his so called objective behind this was to control population. The 'hum do humare do' that is We two and our two children campaign of Sanjay Gandhi lead to lakhs of forced vasectomies in the country both urban and rural areas and the doctors were well paid for it. In addition to the common man, the judiciary and the media bore the maximum brunt of the excesses of the Emergency. How can suspension of rights of the people, devoiding them of their freedom and liberty can actually lead to eradication of social evils and prosperity? This five point programme could actually have been achieved if people were not forced to breathe into the Tyrant's air and speak the language of silence. Salman Rushdie says in his novel *Midnight's Children* about the language of silence and its power; "Because silence, too, has an echo, hollower and long-lasting than the reverberations of any sound." The Constitution, which is the most sacred document of any functioning democracy considered as the basic structure was subverted in the most ruthless manner possible. Indira Gandhi ensured that all proclamations and ordinances were not subjected to judicial review. She amended the Representation of the People Act and two other laws in such a retrospective manner to ensure that the Supreme Court had no other option but to overturn the Allahabad High Court verdict. "The Emergency was therefore a constitutional necessity" says Mrs. Gandhi in her Independence day speech from the Red Fort on August 15, 1975.⁽⁶⁾

Midnight's Children (1981) and *The Great Indian Novel* (1989), the two much acclaimed novels of famous novelists of contemporary India, Salman Rushdie and Shashi Tharoor are the two novels through which I will be dealing with the mythological, historical and socio-political aspects of the mid nineteenth century India and my area of focus will be the amalgamation of these showing the darkest era of democratic India, the Emergency. My paper will present how the mythological history of ancient India depicted in Tharoor's novel re-emerges and affects the twentieth century India shown in Rushdie's novel. This paper will show the continued political tensions between the two opposite wings that is between Kauravas and Pandavas in *Mahabharata* and now between The Congress Party which lead to the emergence of its own rival The Janta Party. Such political upheavals were the result of this internal Emergency of 1975.

History is about remembering and forgetting but, some memories are there which remain unsettled and erupts from time to time. The Chauri Chaura incident, the Indo-Pak War, the Partition of India and Pakistan all these are such historical and political events which threatens us even today. The memories of Emergency are not settled even today because it was wound on the democracy which was derailed by its own democratically elected government. Such historical memories till date have found no solace, it's nature is rather haunting. As Emma Tarlo in her book, *Unsettling Memories* say: "More threatening still, the Emergency challenges the discourse of democracy which claims an unbroken hold over India's past from the present day right back to the attainment of Independence in 1947."⁽⁷⁾ Speaking about memory in the novel, Rushdie says:

Memory has its own special kind. It selects, eliminates, alters, exaggerates, minimizes, glorifies, and vilifies also; but in the end it creates its own reality, its heterogeneous but usually coherent version of events; and no sane human being ever trusts someone else's version more than his own.⁽⁸⁾

Saleem Shanai, the protagonist of the novel, *Midnight's Children* born at midnight on the eve of independence in the city of Bombay. He is tied to the history and his destiny is tied to the country. He is the traveller through all the socio-political backgrounds of the country since independence till the time India again faced bondage of tyranny. His life is shown to have clear modes of connection with the twists and turns of the life of people in the independent Indian nation. The political upheaval and the constant threat of violence that marked the first three decades of independence forms the backdrop of Salman Rushdie's Booker prize winning novel. The novel progresses through the life of the narrator and casts it as an imaginative re-telling of the thirty one years of independent India. Saleem narrates the story of his life reflecting the historical incidents that affects our society even today socially and politically. Since independence, to the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi, the man behind freedom of India in 1947, to Indo-Pak war in 1948 on the issue of beautiful disputed land of Jammu and Kashmir, to Indira Gandhi becoming the Prime minister of India after her father Pandit Jawahar Lal Nehru to her declaration of Emergency after being found guilty of

electoral malpractice in Raj Narain versus Union of India case to her loosing elections in 1977 till her assassination in 1984 are all what I will be painting my canvas with, along with the help of two novels discussed above. The unravelling of the story from narrator's birth and life to the history of India and the subcontinent-- is what Ronald Barthes, the post-structuralist critic calls, 'pleasure of the text'.

The connection between Saleem and fate of the Nation is revealed through the medium of some extraordinary powers. Through a series of minor accidents the young Saleem Shanai discovers that he has some special powers-- one being a keen sense of smell and a related ability to sense impending danger, and secondly, another-- skill of reading other people's minds as well as establishing telepathic connections with a large number of people. It is further revealed that the people with whom Saleem networks through telepathic means are those who were born at midnight. The story establishes that while there were 1001 children to begin with, about 420 perish on account of causes like infant-mortality and disease. Hence, the remaining strength of the Midnight's Children Conference was reduced to 581 which is a direct allusion to the number of seats in the Indian Parliament. In some ways the diversity amongst the Midnight's Children can be viewed as symbol of the possibilities of democratic pluralism in independent India. While the Midnight's Children go through intermittent phases of agreement and discord among themselves grows increasingly wary of Shiva, with whom he was exchanged at birth. He loses his extraordinary powers as well as his telepathic connection with the other Midnight's Children when his family moves to Pakistan. After most of his family dies in air-raids during the 1965 war, Saleem's sister leaves him in the care of the Pakistani Army. After facing injuries during one such raid that destroyed his house in Karachi, Saleem suffers from memory loss, he forgets his own name. He views the 1965 war as a conspiracy to eliminate his family. This identification of larger events with personal circumstances is part of the recurrent theme of metaphorical 'modes of connection' between the existence of the nation and Saleem Shanai's life.

After Mrs. Indira Gandhi was sworn as the Prime minister of India after her father in 1966, India again had war with Pakistan over the creation of Bangladesh, formerly known as East Pakistan. Saleem was put to service again in the 1971 war of Bangladesh liberation for intelligence in the army. He and his colleagues spent some restless nights in Sunderbans and

was later identified by Parvathi, the witch and went to Delhi with her. He realised he got back his magical powers and started living in a magician's ghetto probably near the Turkman Gate of Old Delhi where the slum clearance or the city beautification programme was being conducted in the city as written by Rohinton Mistry in his novel *A Fine Balance* (1995) ⁽⁹⁾. The slum clearance whose objective was to remake the cities and the sterilization which relied on to implement family planning, went drastically wrong hurting people and their sentiments specially the poor and the underprivileged.

Saleem describes Mrs. Gandhi as monstrous figure of the nightmares. He and the other children of midnight were forcibly subjected to sterilisation; the parliamentary members they signify are rendered impotent, unable to wield their governmental powers. Rushdie says; "Things which cannot be cure must be endured". But, despite the hopelessness of Rushdie's representation of the Emergency, he still has faith in yet positive vision of India. Saleem's wife at that time, Parvati, is pregnant and her labour lasts thirteen days, the amount of time between Mrs. Gandhi's indictment and her announcement of the Emergency. Aadam Shanai is borne out from the coupling of two of the most powerful of midnight's children, Parvati and Shiva, the creator of the universe according to the Hindu Mythology. Aadam is born after a difficult and prolonged labour-period for the mother on June 26, 1975 – the day of the declaration of Emergency. The symbolism is obvious with Saleem Shanai's birth coinciding with the creation of a new country and his son's birth coinciding with the beginning of a period of intense turmoil for the nation. He is offered as India's new promise, as are all the other children whom Shiva has fathered; "We the children of independence, rushed wildly and too fast into our future; he Emergency-born, will be is already more cautious, biding his time; but when he acts, he will be impossible to resist." Rushdie implies hope lies in the new generation of people.

'Widow's hostel' was the place where Saleem was arrested and sent. The 'widow' in the novel is symbolic of Mrs. Indira Gandhi. At this location Saleem is coerced into divulging the whereabouts of the other Midnight's Children. The members of the Midnight's Children Conference are the apprehended and detained in the same facility. All of them are subsequently sterilised and this has the effect of depriving them not only of their reproductive abilities but also takes away their special abilities, "The truest, deepest motive behind the

declaration of State of Emergency was the smashing, pulverizing, the irreversible discombobulation of the children of midnight.”⁽¹⁰⁾ Mistry in his novel on Emergency *A Fine Balance* presents the plight of the men who were subjected to forced vasectomy by the government mainly by the orders of Mr. Sanjay Gandhi, the son of the Prime minister. From the old aged men to the one’s not even married like Omprakash in the novel were forced for the process. They took random people from the streets to the family planning centres for vasectomy. Ishvar Darji’s legs get affected due to the sterilization. Both Omprakash and Ishvar become disabled and castrated respectively. Kusum Gokran in the poem *Dirge of the Downtrodden*⁽¹¹⁾ says; “And now in an age where births are controlled and abortions legalised, I plead for euthanasia, while time flows listlessly by over this barren life”. Indira Gandhi’s imposition of Emergency has affected many lives especially those downtrodden people like Om and Ishvar. Their life got shattered under the programme like family planning, city beautification and forced sterilization. The people on the margins always suffer be it communal riots, wars between countries, economic or political upsurge or emergency in the country.

Shiva is identified as Saleem’s alter-ego. The relationship between these two characters can be considered as a metaphor for the relationship between India and Pakistan, which were separated at birth and also the two names one Hindu, Shiva and another Muslim, Saleem shows the relationship between the Hindus and Muslims at that time. Religion in the name of politics since ages have been widening the gaps, first it separated boundaries, now people. While Saleem is the leader of the Midnight’s Children’s Conference that represents the possibilities for democratic pluralism in independent India, Major Shiva acts as an agent of the authoritarian state which seeks to subjugate these possibilities.

“Reality is a question of perspective, the further you get away from the past, the more concrete and plausible it seems- but as you approach the present, it inevitably seems more and more incredible”⁽¹²⁾, says Rushdie in his novel. Shashi Tharoor’s *The Great Indian Novel* which is a more fanciful attempt in re-writing and re-telling the modern Indian history. The novel interweaves some of the major political occurrences in the twentieth century India with the storyline of the epic *Mahabharata*. The actions and lives of several leaders of the freedom struggle as well as post-independence India are identified with those of mythical characters in

the epic. The author exhibits a considerable degree of creativity in playing around with the actual chronology of events so as to ensure some correlation with the plot of the epic. An allegory is drawn between the events surrounding the imposition of Emergency in India and the Battle of Kurukshetra in the *Mahabharata*. The novel serves the function of both being a parable and a satirical work in so far as it takes liberties in suggesting the causes behind some of the occurrences in the lives of prominent individuals. The novel weaves a story about individuals who were active participants in the politics of the period. The schism between the Indira Gandhi-led Congress and the opposition has been likened to the mythological feud between the Kauravas and their cousin Pandavas. The theme of internecine conflict finds resonance since many of the opposition leaders were former Congress politicians who had been manoeuvred into insignificance in the late 1960's.

Tharoor in the novel names Indira Gandhi as Priya Durodhani who was convicted of electoral misconduct and by the advice of Siddharth Shankar Ray, the Law minister addressed as Shakuni Shankar Ray because of his wickedness as Shakuni of *Mahabharata* who plans the famous exile of Pandavas by playing the game of chausar in which they lost everything. The craftiness and wicked ideas of Shakuni Shankar Ray convinced Priya Duryodhini and lead to the declaration of Emergency by seizing all the powers in her hands. He himself hold the emergency dictatorial powers in West Bengal during the Naxalite uprising. This is shown in the seventeenth book of the novel: The Drop of Honey – A Parable. Here Draupadi, the wife of five Pandava brothers in *Mahabharata* is addressed as the Democracy by Tharoor which was being stripped off by the hands of Kauravas, the Congress Party and there was no Krishna to save her as he saved Draupadi. Arjuna addressed as the Indian news media is the third among the five pandavas served as the most important warrior in the Kurukshetra war that in the times of Emergency. Though, the press had few rights, still it was operational at multi levels and people were aware of the happenings surrounding them. Jayaprakash Drona, the instructor in the arts of warfare to the Pandavas and Kauravas is the freedom fighter Jayaprakash Narayan who fought for 'Sampoorna Kranti' for the people of India. He was the one who persuaded Mrs. Gandhi to resign as people were against her but her lust for power did not let her do so. He supported some student's movement in Bihar which made him their leader. Further frustrated and shocked by the autocracy of the Emergency, he lead mass revolts and rallies against the government which were in favour of the people. In the *Mahabharata*, Dronacharya-- who had been the teacher of both the Kauravas and the

Pandavas in their childhood, fights for the Kaurava side at the 'Battle of Kurukshetra' despite being more attached to the Pandavas on a personal level because he was always known for his truthfulness.

The chapter in the novel titled 'The bungle book – or, the reign of error' alludes to the political developments during the years leading up to the emergency such as the split in the Congress party and Indira Gandhi's self-styled 'socialist' turn with controversial measures such as the abolition of privy purses and the nationalisation of banks. The novel of course does not describe a physical battle between the Kaurava Party and the opposition, but draws sufficient parallels between the mythical conflict and the widespread mobilization against the government which prompts the declaration of a 'state of siege', the Emergency of 1975. The most direct comparison is made between the apocalyptic Battle of Kurukshetra and the elections 1977 where the Janta Party wins over the Congress Party. This comparison can be viewed as depicting the imposition of Emergency as a clash between those for and against democracy. *The Great Indian Novel* points to the internal contradictions within the Janta Party that were based on personal ambitions and insecurities of the leaders of its various constituents rather than any principled positions. Such internal conflict is seen in the name of Ashwathama, the son of Guru Dronacharya in Mahabharata who was used by the Pandavas to get rid of Dronacharya who was an efficient marshall for the Kaurava forces on the battlefield. A rumour about the death of his son Ashwathama was created and Yudhishtir told Dronacharya that 'Ashwathama is dead' even though it was actually an elephant by that name which had been killed at that stage. The grief-stricken Dronacharya then became an easy target on the battlefield for them. But, in the political outfield as Tharoor has presented, Ashwathama is Jagjivan Ram, the defence minister in the Indira Gandhi led Congress Party government. He later joins the opposition during the emergency period and later becomes the deputy Prime minister, at the behest of Jayaprakash Narayan in Morarji Desai led Janta Party government.

Tharoor in his great political satirical work has presented a very balanced account of the Indian history since India struggling for independence by citing the annexation of Oudh (Awadh province) by the British leading to the revolt of 1857 which started the famous freedom struggle among the people of India because it was that humiliation which Indians

were not able to take upon them. Mob can be aroused on two levels in India, I believe one on economic matters and one on religious matters. This is what was happening at that time the sepoys were not paid accordingly and were discriminated on the basis of their skin colour of being an Indian. Christian missionaries started coming up and in some parts of the country conversions were also practiced. There was a direct threat to the people's financial and spiritual life which was unbearable leading to the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857. Tharoor also cites the famous Dandi March of Mahatma Gandhi as the 'Great Mango March', the Jallianwala Bagh Massacre of 1929 as the 'Hastinapur Massacre'.

While such fictional works could be viewed as part of an emerging narrative which memorializes the Emergency period in a far more interesting and engaging manner than any government records or legal commentaries, there are problems with over-emphasizing the role of such fiction. Since the stringent censorship during the time of the Emergency itself curbed the publication and circulation of works which criticised or satirized governmental acts, it is widely sensed that there is inadequate availability of historical, anthropological and sociological material relating to the period. The lack of empirical material could have instead triggered creative instincts that have been translated into material to compensate for the same, with one form being fiction. Emma Tarlo in her non-fictional work on the Emergency, *Unsettling Memories* says that this growing body of the 'literature of the emergency' should be read with skepticism since there is an observed tendency to demonize the authority figures associated with the period and exaggerate the experiences of governmental excesses.

Narinder Vashist sums up the silenced identity of people during the democratic failure of the country. He says; "Let's see when our sealed lips open; It has been ages since I heard my own voice"⁽¹³⁾. Such was the stage of people who were suffering from loss of their freedom of speech and expression, a very important fundamental right in the Constitution of India. They were facing that mutant oppression, not only mutant rather they were allowed to hear what they wanted and allowed to speak what they wanted to hear. This further brings a poem of hope by India's loved Prime minister, Shree Atal Bihari Vajpayee who was imprisoned in 1976, he writes; "Though we break, we will not bend. Darkness itself challenges us..."⁽¹⁴⁾ Shashi Tharoor rightly said about the country of its diminishing greatness and aura, he says in his novel, *The Great Indian Novel*:

They tell me India is an underdeveloped country....I tell them they have no knowledge of history and even less of their own heritage. I tell them that if they would only read the Mahabharata and the Ramayana, study the Golden ages of the Mauryas and the Guptas and even of the Mughals, they would realise that India is not an underdeveloped country but a highly developed one in an advanced state of decay.⁽¹⁵⁾

Notes

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