

SALMAN RUSHDIE'S *THE FREE RADIO*: A STUDY ON INDIA'S MASS STERILIZATION DURING EMERGENCY

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The Emergency was a twenty-one months period from 1975 to 1976 during which Prime Minister Indira Gandhi ruled by decree. It was declared by President Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed due to internal disturbances. Indira Gandhi started an aggressive program in 1976-77 to control population growth by sterilizing men and women. The government was forced to adopt such policies because the funding nations and agencies like the World Bank, the Swedish International Development Authority and the UN Population Fund threatened to stop granting funds to India. Indira Gandhi along with his son Sanjay Gandhi tried to control population growth with gruesome measures which in history is described as the dark days.

The government promised rewards to men and women for undergoing sterilization with a radio. Irrigation and fresh drinking water facilities were given to the rural people undergoing the surgery. Young men were also given the threat of being arrested on refusal to go for sterilization and couple with two children must undergo the operation or else they would be jailed for two years. The sterilization teams would drag or pick up young men and forcefully sterilized them. Doctors were given monthly sterilization targets to complete. Young men stopped moving to areas where the sterilization teams and their vehicles would operate; they would prefer taking shelter in the woods rather than going for sterilization. There were reports of police cordoning off villages and virtually dragging the men to surgery. Even promotions and payments were in abeyance until the government employees themselves undergo sterilization and complete their quota of motivating other people for the same. For drawing salaries, employees need to produce sterilization certificates. Even the driving license was not renewed without sterilization certificates. School students whose parents refused sterilization were detained. Free medical treatment was provided only to those who would accept the vasectomy. Jail inmates, the poor on the road, and hospital patients were also not exempted from the surgery. Also, there are reports on the use of sterilization as a tool to threaten opposition leaders.

The dark days of emergency have been portrayed in Salman Rushdie's short story; *The Free Radio* published in his collection *East West* in 1994; divided into three sections. There are only three characters in the story-Ramani, a young, good-looking man who rides a rickshaw he inherited from his father, the thief's wife; a widow who is attractive, vicious and ten years older than him and also has five children from her previous marriage and the narrator of the story; a retired school teacher who tries to dissuade Ramani from the clutches of the widow.

The story revolves around Ramani who falls in love with the widow of a thief. They first meet when Ramani drives his rickshaw into the town while the widow is shopping at the bania's shop. She calls Ramani

and rides home with her children. After this Ramani and the widow are seen everywhere in public. At the same time, Ramani falls in the company of some bad friends and starts drinking illegal liquor. Had Ramani's mother been alive she would have fallen off from shame, the narrator laments. The narrator tries to dissuade Ramani from mixing the new friends but in vain. These young friends of Ramani are members of the Youth Movement and as an identifying mark they wear armbands. Though Ramani himself does not wear an armband, he fully supports the young men's activities and ideologies. It is they who get free drinks from Ramani put in his mind that he is good-looking and should try movies in Mumbai. Even the widow, in a public place, flatters Ramani that he should try in movies. This was overheard by the narrator and he decided to meet the widow for the sake of Ramani's dead parents whom the narrator knew very well.

The narrator tells her to stop going out with Ramani instead she should go to Banaras, the place meant for the widows. But the widow cursing him instead said "... Ramani has asked to marry me and I have said no because I wish no more children, and he is a young man and should have his own. So, tell that to the whole world and stop your cobra poison". From then, the narrator stops taking interest in Ramani's affair. Shortly after this incident, a big white caravan, sent by the health officer, reaches the town. This caravan, guarded by armband youths is used for sterilizing men. Not long after the arrival of the caravan, Ramani starts telling people that he would get a transistor radio as a gift from the central government. Everyone believed that this is as a result of Ramani's ardent desire for the radio. Ramani is seen much happier than before. Soon Ramani marries the widow. Ramani now works because he has more responsibility. The widow, who now is Ramani's wife is rarely seen in the market. Ramani mimics a radio broadcast and carries an invisible radio in his hand up to his ear. The narrator laments "...had divined that Ram had poured into the idea of the radio all his worries and regrets about what he had done and that if the dream were to die he would be forced to face the full gravity of his crime against his own body, to understand that the thief's widow had turned him, before she married him, into a thief of a stupid and terrible kind because she had made him rob himself."

Soon the caravan is back in the town Ramani waits for his gift. On the third day, he goes to the caravan with his wife for his reward. He is beaten and pulled out of the van by his armband friends.

Finally, Ramani sells his rickshaw and tells the narrator that they are leaving for Bombay to turn his dream of becoming a film star a reality. The narrator comments, "...they were wonderful letters, brimming with confidence, but whenever I read them, and sometimes I read them still, I remember the expression which came over his face in the days just before he learned the truth about his radio, and the huge mad energy which he had poured into the act of conjuring reality, buy an act of magnificent faith, out of the hot thin air between his cupped hand and his ear".

The Free Radio is a study on the dirty plan of the government to control population growth in India. The government tries to make the campaign successful by any means, it adopts measures and different tactics to lure the common people for sterilization. At the same time, there is no initiative from the government to prevent the sale and consumption of illegal liquor by the youth. Ramani and his armband friends drink illegal liquor. The story also depicts the life of the common people like Laxman, Ramani and even the thief's wife who are living in acute poverty. There is no poverty alleviation programme initiated by the government. These people pass their days in acute poverty.

The sterilization campaign receives the fullest support of the government. The local health officer brings a white caravan to the area and parks it under the banyan tree. Yet, many people did not support the

campaign. Ramani's friends; the arm-banded youths would guard it against the anger of the people and often force men for the operation as the narrator says, "every night men were taken into this van for a while and things were done to them". To lure the common people to go for sterilization, the government declared a gift in the form of a radio. The narrator accosts Ramani if he has been to the caravan. Ramani admits that he is in love with the widow and wants to marry her. The narrator says, 'My idiot child, you have let that woman deprive you of your manhood!' Ramani replies, "It does not stop love-making or anything, excuse me, teacher sahib, for speaking of such a thing. It stops babies only and my woman did not want children anymore, so now everything is hundred per cent OK. Also, it is in the national interest." Ramani expresses that his free radio would arrive shortly as a reward from the government. He reminds the narrator that in his childhood he saw Laxman, the tailor, who received a radio from the government just after the operation. Not only the narrator, everyone else knew that the radio scheme has been stopped long ago. Ramani still believes that he would get his reward from the government. The narrator did not reveal to Ramani the discontinuation of the gift.

From Ramani's perspective, the sterilization campaign is a good thing. He gladly agrees to it and willingly goes to the caravan, believing that by agreeing to undergo a vasectomy he not only makes his wife happy but also does something for the country. Most of all, his dream of getting "a brand-new first-class battery-operated transistor radio" makes him cheerful and happier in his life. But Ramani is ignorant of the cunning ways used by the government to lure poor people for their benefit. The government machinery has taken off Ramani's freedom, his gift and his identity. Then, for Ramani, there is no other possibility of fulfilling his ardent desire of owning a radio, that too, from the government. It is a matter of great pride and gives him a superior status in society. He knows he can never own a radio by pulling his rickshaw. With patience, he waits for a year for the gift. When the caravan arrives in the city, he goes to the van for the second time and encounters the reality of life. He is beaten and thrown out of the van with "his hair grease smudged onto his face and blood coming from his mouth."

Thus, the story describes a young Indian whose innocence has been played by the ruling class that has never survived violence, trickery and hypocrisy.

References:

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<https://www.eng-literature.com/2021/08/title-the-free-radio.html>