

## LOCATING ANIMAL STAKEHOLDERS IN THE DEMOCRATIC NATIONALISM IN RANJIT LAL'S *THE CROW CHRONICLES*

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### ABSTRACT

*Indian national consciousness, ever since the freedom struggle of the early 20th century, has been defined partly by the principles of democracy and the idea of tolerance. However, the Indian colonial past and the neo-colonial era under the emergency of the 1970s have been instances of de-democratization of the nation and governance. Subsequently, cultural texts, both in Indian English and regional languages, were produced as challenges to anti-democratic discourse and as vehicles for re-democratization and healthy national consciousness. In these texts, both the literary devices and Indian English are seen deployed to challenge the anti-democratic and totalitarian discourse of the national politics of the Emergency era.*

*Ranjit Lal's The Crow Chronicles is a text that negotiates the national consciousness by using animal allegory and satirical anthropomorphism. This paper tries to explain how Lal rallies public awareness towards the anti-democratic and anti-Indian measures which were implemented in the Emergency era. Also, within the scope of this paper is the analysis of Lal's plea for freedom of expression and free media as the evident traces of a literary tolerant national consciousness.*

**Keywords** – National Consciousness, Democracy, De-Democratization, National Discourse.

The Indian freedom struggle in the early 20th century played a crucial role in shaping Indian national consciousness. The period from the establishment of The British East India Company in India in 1757 to India's independence in 1947 witnessed major events which

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shaped the Indian national consciousness. This period produced many great Indian freedom fighters like Mahatma Gandhi, Sardar Patel, Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Dadabhai Naoroji, etc. whose attempts to bring Indian citizens together to fight against British rule created a collective national consciousness. This national consciousness and the subsequent freedom were built on the ideals of democracy. The Indian freedom struggle is recorded in world history as a great example of the unity of people against colonization, enslavement, and exploitation. Indian writers and poets also contributed to building this consciousness through literary publications, glorifying Indian culture. For example, Rabindranath Tagore composed the Indian national anthem (originally written in Bengali as “Bharoto Bhagyo Bidhata”) on 11 December 1911, clearly emphasizing the rich Indian culture, the democratic foundation of India, unity in diversity, and secularism.

However, India’s colonial past had a complex impact on its national consciousness. On one hand, it created a sense of unity among people belonging to different castes and religions, nurtured pride for cultural diversity, and gave rise to democratic principles. On the other hand, it created challenges related to communal relations, linguistic diversity, economic inequality, and political disputes. The colonial past exposed India to Western political ideas, including concepts of democracy, freedom of speech, and human rights which shaped the Indian constitution after independence. However, British rule, which was built on the foundation of ‘divide and rule’ on the basis of religion and community, continued to affect the Indian democratic constitution after independence.

In addition, the Indian Emergency of the 1970s resulted in a dreadful blow to India’s democratic ideals. The ex-Prime Minister of India, Indira Gandhi, declared an Emergency in India in 1975 to maintain law and order in the country. It was also said that the decision was taken to protect the country from internal and external threats. It officially suspended civil liberties and imposed strict censorship on the media and freedom of speech to suppress political opposition undermining the very foundation of Indian democracy. Elections were cancelled and the opposition leaders were arrested and imprisoned. Any attempt of political revolt against the government was silenced. Moreover, it controlled the circulation of information, limiting the exchange of ideas which created a climate of mystery, suspense and fear among the common people. It diminished people’s faith in the democratic system. These aspects of anti-democratic political situation were reflected in both regional and Indian English narratives.

Literature not only reflects contemporary society but also voices people’s values, morals, aspirations and struggles. For centuries, literature has proved to have the power to shape society. Many cultural texts were eventually published, both in Indian English and regional languages that served as a powerful challenge to the anti-democratic tendencies of

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the Emergency, reclaiming re-democratization and healthy national consciousness. For example, Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981) is a thought-provoking exploration of the social and political struggles in contemporary India. Apart from showcasing the desires and hopes for a new nation, it critiques the anti-democratic misuse of political powers by authorities. In fact, Rushdie is of the view that: "Writers and politicians are natural rivals. Both groups try to make the world in their own images; they fight for the same territory. And the novel is one way of denying the official, political version of truth" (Rushdie 14). Jayaprakash Narayan's book *Towards Total Revolution* (1979) is a direct attack on the Indian Emergency of the 1970s. Nayantara Sahgal's *Rich Like Us* (1985), with the setting just a month after the declaration of Emergency, portrays the moral decay and political corruption of the era. Rohinton Mistry's novel *Such a Long Journey* (1991), starts with its setting in 1971 and narrates Gustad's struggles against poverty along with the vivid description of the scams of the government involving terrorism, mystery and money laundering. It is a critique of the political, economic and social turmoil that India had to go through during the Emergency. Another novel of Rohinton Mistry which deals with the theme of Emergency is *A Fine Balance* (1995). Likewise, Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel* (1989) uses allegory and satire to blend the timeless narrative of the *Mahabharata* and the political turmoil of the Emergency. Similarly, novels like Raj Gill's *The Torch-Bearer* (1983), Manohar Malgonkar's *The Garland Keepers* (1986), Arun Joshi's *The City and the River* (1990), O. V. Vijayan's *The Saga of Dharmapuri* (Malayalam 1985), Rahi Masoom Raza's *Katraa bi Aarzo* (Hindi 1978), Nirmal Verma's *Raat ka Reporter* (Hindi 1989), Kamaleshwar's *Kaali Andhi* (Hindi 1989) feature, directly or indirectly, the disappointment, and fear spread all over the country during the Emergency period. These novels also depict the threat to national consciousness.

Contemporary Indian English writers and regional language writers used a variety of literary devices like allegory, satire, symbolism, and irony, to shed light on the oppressive regime and consequences of the Emergency. Employing these literary devices, the writers not only recorded the social, political and economic disorder of the period but also contributed to the collective memory of the time when freedom of expression was under threat. These literary publications work as a stark reminder of the dangers of a totalitarian discourse in national politics. Moreover, these works highlight the importance of protecting the principles of democracy, safeguarding individual liberties, and freedom of expression.

Among all the literary devices, animal allegory and satirical anthropomorphism are the most commonly used literary devices to critique human follies and behaviours through the clever guise of animals. For example, Aesop's *Fables*, ancient tales dating back to classical antiquity, utilize animals to teach moral lessons. Also, Rudyard Kipling's *The Jungle Book*, a masterpiece in the world of storytelling, gives animals linguistic and cognitive

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skills enabling them to show distinct human emotions. Over the centuries, writers all over the world have used anthropomorphic animals to explore issues of prejudice, discrimination, and social injustice. Satirical anthropomorphism, as a literary device, is a great tool to showcase social, political, and moral issues in a form which not only entertains readers but compels them to ponder over the complex issues of contemporary societies. Moreover, in satirical anthropomorphism animals become more than just creatures of nature; they transform into metaphorical figures, endowed with witty dialogues and relatable personas, to represent the virtues, immoralities, and eccentricities of human beings. For example, George Orwell's *Animal Farm* has stood the test of time with its characters like pigs, horses, and other farm animals who overthrow their oppressive human farmer, only to find themselves replicating the very tyranny they sought to escape.

Along similar lines, many Indian English novelists turned towards allegory and satire to criticize Indian political conditions during the 1970s. For approximately two decades after the Emergency, Indian writers tried to examine the idea of nationalism and a new national consciousness emerged as a result of the reaction to the Emergency era. As Vinay Kirpal points out: "Historically, politically, the 1970s were one of the most turbulent years in Indian history. The role of the 1970s in shaping the new Indian consciousness has been exceptional. The 1980s novel is the direct result of the events that occurred in the 1970s and the early 1980s" (Kirpal xx). Similarly, Dr. O. P. Mathur, professor and writer of *Indira Gandhi and the Emergency as Viewed in the Indian Novel* (2004) states: "Many eminent Indian English novelists chose to focus on the Emergency either as the main theme, or as a part of the more comprehensive sweep..." (Mathur 124).

Ranjit Lal's *The Crow Chronicles*, a political animal allegory, exposes the hypocrisy behind the declaration of Emergency. Lal re-renders the Emergency, using satirical anthropomorphism as a literary device, which opposes the version of the Emergency era propagated by the State. It reconstructs historical events that happened during the Emergency, with animal characters replacing political figures, which gives voice to the oppressed, humiliated, and muzzled common citizens of India, creating the counter-memory of the era. Ruskin Bond describes this novel: "Ranjit Lal uses his wide knowledge of birds and animal life to create a pungent political satire in the tradition of *Animal Farm* and *Watership Down*. Very readable, entertaining and topical" (Bond, Backcover of *The Crow Chronicles*)

Ranjit Lal uses a bird sanctuary of the Keoladeo National Park of Bharatpur as a setting for his intricate political satire. Though Ruskin Bond has compared *The Crow Chronicles* with *Animal Farm*, unlike *Animal Farm*, *The Crow Chronicles* portrays many characters with distinct characteristics, giving each bird its personhood to create a resemblance with real-life political figures and common citizens. The National Park creates a

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picture of modern democracy in the minds of readers. It has a weak Prime Minister, named Pinky Stink Tainted Storkji, who has no say in any of the decisions made by the Cabinet which is completely controlled by the heads of Intelligence and Security. To make the satire more powerful Lal uses funny but provocative names for anthropomorphized birds, as for example, the dictator is His Excellency Shri Khatarnak Kala Kaloota Kawa Kaw Kaw, Phutki, tiny-tot tailor bird, is the Editor of the magazine, Budhboo Bundicoot is a Chief of Intelligence, Lt-Gen Chakumar Jungli Billa, a feral tomcat, is a chief of Security, Naak Me Dum, is a Director of the CBI, etc. However funny these names are, they describe the nature of the jobs done by these birds and animals. This makes the Keoladeo National Park a perfect picture of the Indian democracy before and during the Emergency with its corrupt bureaucrats, quarrelsome cabinet, internal rivalry, political plots, sacrifice of national consciousness and secrecy.

Keeping in mind the scenario of the Indian Emergency, Lal brings his dictator, His Excellency Shri Khatarnak Kala Kaloota Kawa Kaw Kaw, from outside. Though he belongs to the same species of crow, unlike other crows in the park, he is completely white in colour. Lal describes the formidable personality of this outsider: "...his feathers a blazing detergent white, his eyes smouldering like lava ... Besides, there was a look in his eyes that seemed to sap one's courage" (Lal 48). This crow loves jewellery and he collects lots of illegal wealth which he uses to bribe other authorities. His followers are called crownies. Moreover, as soon as he settles in the sanctuary with his followers, he conducts a political coup in the name of official investigation, arrests the Prime Minister, newspaper editors, and other officials and takes control of the Cabinet. Additionally, without wasting a day, he declares an Emergency: "A state of emergency has been declared within the park and all fundamental rights suspended" (Lal 215). However, he convinces all other birds of the sanctuary of his good intentions: "Kaw's iron voice rolled over the waters ... To our horror, we found that the government was toxic and the press was toxic! ... So, after grave and lengthy consultations with your mighty sovereign, it was agreed that I take over power until such time we flush clean the system and call for fresh elections" (Lal 249).

The above sequence of events recreates the actual political happenings during the Emergency in the 1970s. When Indira Gandhi imposed an Emergency the official state narrative, which was made popular in newspapers and other media channels, maintained that the Emergency was a needed step to safeguard the country from hidden threats, especially by the JP movement. Indian historian Bipan Chandra records in his book *In the Name of Democracy: JP Movement and the Emergency* how the State and the opposition justified their actions in the name of democracy: "Mrs Gandhi's primary defense of the Emergency and her main criticism of the JP movement was that its disruptive character endangered India's stability, security, integrity and democracy. "In the name of democracy it has been sought to

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negate the very functioning of democracy,” she said on the morrow of the Emergency” (Chandra 2).

Though Kaw promises fresh elections, he eventually suspends elections as happened during the Emergency: “‘Bah!’ he snorted. ‘Who needs elections! Democratic nonsense!’” (Lal 255). Likewise, many other facets of the Emergency era of the 1970s appear in the novel, as for example are the forced false confessions, sealing of newspapers, strict surveillance, arrests and imprisonment of opponent party representatives, assassination plots, political rallies, secret meetings of the opposition party, raising funds illegally by the ruling party, etc. Kaw also tries to ensure that his fledglings continue to rule after him and arranges a big celebration for the first flight of his heirs. However, they are humiliated by the onlookers as koels as plotted by the opposition: “‘But those are NOT crows! They are koels! They are koels!! Koels! Koels! Koels! Koels!’ And then, mimicking hideously, obscenely even, ‘Cuckoo! Cuckoo, Cuckoo! Brain fever! Brain fever! Brain fever!’” (Lal 397). Lal also hints at the nature and future of Kaw’s fledglings: “Three were ordinary blue-green crows’ eggs with brown flecks. The fourth ... ah, but that is another story” (Lal 406). The dictatorship of Kaw ends with a political coup, Izzat Ka Faluda, that dishonours him and makes him leave the park. With his dismissal Emergency comes to an end with the restoration of democracy in the park: “And democracy had returned to the Keoladeo National Park” (Lal 404).

The novel recreates the exact historical happening of the Emergency era of the 1970s using animal allegory and satirical anthropomorphism. Lal vividly portrays how people united against anti-democratic and anti-Indian measures which were implemented in the Emergency era. He also shows how this struggle created a collective national consciousness among people to re-establish democracy in the country: “We, the free birds of the Keoladeo National Park, do solemnly swear to fight the evil forces of corvid Nazism and tyranny to the last drop of our blood, and until such time as is necessary to regain our freedom and democracy. That we shall be united in this endeavour and stand by one another, no matter how strong or dangerous our adversaries may be” (Lal 261).

Thus, Ranjit Lal places national consciousness based on democratic ideals and the ideology and practice of the Emergency as diametrically opposite in his narrative. He also critiques the gradual erosion of national consciousness in the face of political dictatorship. The novel is also a reminder for the readers that nationalism and national consciousness without democratic principles can be detrimental to a nation-state.

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