

ABJECTIFYING THE OTHER: A STUDY OF ENTOMOLOGICAL AND VERMINOUS TROPE IN ROHINTON MISTRY'S A FINE BALANCE

Dr Muhammad Shoaib

Assistant Professor English

Govt. Graduate College for Boys Gulberg Lahore

Abstract

This article on Indian-Canadian novelist Rohinton Mistry's A Fine Balance (1996) traces the entomological and verminous trope in the novel in order to establish a link between insects and the suppressed sections of the Indian society. The research has been prompted by a scarcity of scholarly material on Mistry's abundant use of entomological and verminous imagery throughout his fiction. Addressing this gap, I argue that Mistry makes a significant intervention in the literary discourse on the Indian Emergency, imposed by the Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in 1975, by making visible the dehumanization and plight of the people on the margins of the society. Employing Julia Kristeva's notion of abjection (1982) as a theoretical framework, the essay contends that the multitudes of insects wriggling into the novel are symptomatic of the creatureliness of the underprivileged human beings and their positioning beyond the boundary of common humanity and ethical responsiveness during the Emergency. Through an explication of the four main characters' multiple encounters with worms and insects, the novel problematizes and contests the narratives of idealism woven around the Emergency by those in power. Attending to the notions of repulsion, fragility and infestation commonly associated with abject creatures, the article analyses the role of the political ideology in producing optimal conditions to obfuscate the vulnerability of the disenfranchised and the homeless.

Keywords: Rohinton Mistry, abjection, insects, verminous, dehumanization, Emergency

Introduction

Rohinton Mistry has three novels and a short story cycle to his credit, and insects mark a significant presence in all these works. His microscopic vision magnifies the moments of the characters' encounters with insects and worms. These encounters highlight the position of the characters vis-à-vis the social and political environment they inhabit. *A Fine Balance* (1996) is chiefly set during the years of the State of Emergency imposed by the then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. The narrative mainly focuses on the lives of four characters: Dina Dalal, a Parsi widow; Maneck Kohlah, a young Parsi student and her lodger; and Ishvar and Omprakash, the low-caste Hindu tailors employed by Dina. By bringing together people from three different families, Mistry weaves a multiplicity of perspectives into the narrative. Through the relationship of these four characters with a lot of other people, the novelist highlights the abjection and dehumanization of the impoverished during the years of the Emergency which saw the suspension of democratic rights and judicial procedures. The novel is part of what Emma Tarlo (2003) calls a set of "post-Emergency counter narratives" (p. 31). The aim of this article is to put spotlight on the imagery related to various kinds of worms and insects in the novel. It will be indicated how worms and insects serve as metaphors of the human condition in the rural and urban spaces of India around the time of the Emergency.

In its attention to the dehumanizing effects of the Emergency, Mistry's *A Fine Balance* is a literary intervention in support of the oppressed and under-represented sections of the Indian society. It offers nuanced representations of various subjectivities that are normally rendered abject or invisible by the dominant discourse. Insects and other small creatures penetrate the text, influence its vocabulary, nomenclature and imagery, and shape the readers' perception of the characters. Apart from the real insects, some characters speak of others in entomological terms.

My article will focus on a detailed account of different encounters of the protagonists—Dina Dalal, Maneck Kohla, Ishvar and Omprakash—with insects, worms and cockroaches and their reaction to these encounters. The main aspects of entomological abjection discussed in this article are: repulsion, fragility and infestation. I discuss how these encounters are indicative of the social and psychological condition of these characters and the treatment meted out to them by different political and social forces. Further, the article explicates how the insects stand for the apprehensions and fears of the characters, threatening their notions of independence, identity and justice.

Literature Review

References to insects are currently becoming frequent in literature as nearly “every author has something to say about insects” (Calabrese 2008, p. 2210). However, Brown believes that the significance of insects has not yet been “treated very rigorously” (Brown 2007, p. 5) in literary studies. One reason for the scarcity of scholarly material on insects is that very few people take pleasure in watching or reading about insects and spiders while majority of the people are entomophobic. Kellert (1993) believes that the general public mostly carries the emotions of “aversion, dislike, or fear towards most invertebrates, particularly insects and spiders” (p. 849). This goes along with a fear of insects and other arthropods entering their home and a desire to exterminate these creatures when they do. In *Less than Human*, Smith links a discourse of dehumanization with the creatural vocabulary in the political discourse as he refers to the role of propaganda during the 1994 genocide in Rwanda as the “government radio broadcasts characterized Rwandan Tutsis as cockroaches” (Smith 2011, p. 21).

Literary space is replete with insects and creatural beings, though their significance remains relatively under-explored in scholarly discourse. Despite being the humblest creatures in human imagination, “insects animate literature both in a metaphorical and literal sense” (Egerer 2016, p. 502). Literary entomology, a sub-field of cultural entomology is concerned with the treatment of insects in literature and literary studies. It examines the symbolic functions that insects and worms serve in literature. Filipczak (2016) highlights the metaphorical function of the worm imagery in literature. He associates worms with “physicality, material decay, disintegration, and dirt”, but they are also suggestive of “human mortality and transience”, pointing to “his insignificance in the grand scheme of things” (p. 183). Many scholars in the field of literature and animal studies explore relationship between human beings, and other animals and insects. My article, however, is not concerned with human-insect relationship or the rights of the creaturely beings in the human world. It investigates how different insects in Mistry’s novel mirror human beings especially the impoverished and the homeless.

Kristeva’s theory of abjection, as propounded in her landmark work *The Powers of Horror* (1982), can provide useful lenses to study the representation of insects in literary discourse. In Kristeva’s opinion, the abject stands on the border between the self and the other. It “does not respect borders, positions, rules” and “disturbs identity, system, order” (p. 4). It poses a perpetual threat to the integrity of the self. By transgressing the boundary, the abject asserts its significance as well as its fragility. She further says that insects traditionally belong to the earth, not water or air. They will be considered impure if they do not “confine themselves to one element” but try to disrupt “the established taxonomy” and cause “intermixture and disorder” (p. 98). Any encounter with the abject on the part of the subject causes horror, disgust and violent behaviour.

Research Methodology

The premise of this article is to analyze the role of verminous and entomological tropes in Rohinton Mistry's novel *A Fine Balance* (1996). The research design adopted for this purpose is hermeneutic and interpretive. Textual analysis will be employed as a research method. The major aim of the data analysis is to explore and interpret various ways in which Mistry uses verminous and entomological imagery to highlight the plight of the marginalized sections of Indian society during the Emergency.

Data Analysis

Repulsion

Through recurrent entomological imagery, Mistry points out how the Emergency in India imagined the slum-dwellers and the homeless as outsiders and enemies with abject existence and repulsive physicality. Kristeva (1982) recognizes abject as a force that is opposed to and unsettles the conscious self and the symbolic order imposed by society and culture. Abject symptomizes "the reaction of the individual against a threatened breakdown in meaning caused by the loss of the distinction between subject and object or between self and other" (p. 9). The insects in *A Fine Balance* exemplify the condition of the poor and the homeless people as abjectified by the privileged class. Mistry makes visible how encounters with insects threaten the subjects' sense of stability and security. Maneck Kohlah, a college student in the city by the sea, enters a space infested with a swarm of cockroaches on his first day in the college hostel. Feeling his sense of security and cleanliness been threatened, he resorts to violent action: "He crouched stealthily, raised his arm, and unleashed a flurry of blows. Three succumbed to his shoe, the rest disappeared under the bed. He got down on his hands and knees, resolved that they would not escape to haunt him later" (Mistry 1996, p. 235). His hostel fellow Avinash begins to fumigate the room as he thinks that the cockroaches cannot be killed by crushing with shoes because if they kill three, "three dozen will arrive marching in single file, to take revenge. It's like a Hitchcock movie" (Mistry 1996, p. 236). The entomophobia of Maneck runs through the novel as he has a few more encounters with insects and worms during his stay at Dina's house.

This disgust is symptomatic of wider social relations. The cockroaches crushed and fumigated by Maneck and his friend exemplify the thousands of slum-dwellers and footpath sleepers, including Ishvar and Om, trapped in a vicious system of state-sponsored, institutionalized dehumanization during the Emergency. Those at the helm of affairs deny humanity to the underprivileged, equating them with loathsome insects and vermin. These dehumanizing practices are put in place through an intricate web of special laws aiming at eliminating the poor whose abject presence on the streets is seen as a threat to the social and economic stability of India. The novel points out what Thiyagarjan (2016) calls a "taxonomic proximity" between creatural beings and some sections of human society as the latter are placed "closer to the category of the animal in order to justify various forms of dehumanizing violence against them" (p. 198). Just like the cockroaches, the poor and the slum-dwellers of the city have very little space to live in. They are crushed by the authorities during the process of the so-called beautification of the city. The killing of cockroaches through fumigation is also reflective of the inhuman treatment of the Dalits at the hands of the upper caste Hindus. Ishvar recalls how the whole of his family was burnt to death on the direction of Thakur Dharamsi. And just like the cockroaches hiding for safety, Om and Ishvar flee to the city only to be victimized later by the same Thakur.

The political and social system constructs a dehumanizing language that excludes the improper and unclean bodies from the normal social discourse. The crippled beggar Shankar nicknamed Worm is the ultimate embodiment of the abjection and dehumanization of the

beggars in Mrs Gandhi's regime. The life of Shankar is just like that of a crawling creature. He tells Om and Ishvar about his growth as a beggar and how he learned the art of crawling, using his head and elbow: "It was slow going. First I would push my begging tin forward, then wriggle after it" (Mistry 1996, p. 328). The beggars are deliberately made to look like abject creatures in order to evoke public sympathy and to maximize the chances of receiving charity. The act of pity on the part of the people indicates the beggars' exclusion from the mainstream society. The procession of crippled and disfigured beggars for Shankar's funeral rites also moves like lowly terrestrial creatures:

The slowest-moving procession ever to wind its way through city streets started towards the cremation grounds just after four. The great number of cripples kept it at a snail's pace. The deformities of some had atrophied their bodies, reducing them to a froglike squat: they swung along using their arms as levers. A few could only manage the sideways shuffle of a crab. Others, doubled over, crawled forward on their hands and feet, their behinds raised in the air like camels' humps. (Mistry 1996, p. 504-5)

More than a funeral procession, it is a spectacle that attracts the viewers' gaze into the heart of bodily and social abjection. The beggars' deformed and unclean bodies underscore the need for their expulsion from what is clean and pure. The workers at the irrigation project are made to work like beasts of burden with very little food and rest. When the Beggarmaster reaches the irrigation project to retrieve Shankar, the exchange of language between the Beggarmaster and the Facilitator highlights the entomological nature of Shankar and other beggars. The Facilitator tells the Beggarmaster: "two thousand is okay, you can take your Worm. . . . And any bugs or centipedes that you like" (Mistry 1996, p. 364). The underprivileged people also seem to have internalized the dehumanizing discourse spread by the government. Om suggests to his uncle that they should return to their village as he is "fed up of living like this, crawling from one trouble to another" (Mistry 1996, p. 310). Later, he tells Ishvar that the people like them "are less than animals" (540) to the doctors and authorities running the vasectomy centres.

Once the underprivileged and the homeless stand abjectified as less than humans, violence of any kind against them is normalized and valorised; it permeates both political and public spheres. Some proponents and beneficiaries of the Emergency favour the idea of poisoning the beggars and footpath dwellers to death in order to improve India's image in the world. Just like Avinash's use of spray to kill the cockroaches, Dina's rich brother Nusswan suggests using poison to eliminate almost two hundred million surplus people in India who "sit in the gutter and look like corpses" (Mistry 1996, p. 373), spoiling the image of India as a great democracy. He believes it would be good to go to their begging places and "feed them a free meal containing arsenic or cyanide, whichever is cost-effective" (Mistry 1996, p. 373). This statement finds a less serious parallel in the statement of Rajaram, the hair-collector who believes that it is a great favour to steal someone's hair, to deprive someone of "a lice-breeding pasture, which would save the victims time and effort and itchy scalps, not to mention the frivolous expenses of shampoo and hair lotions" (Mistry 1996, p. 480). The Facilitator at the irrigation project is all praise for the government's operation against the footpath-sleepers because it provides him with an almost free labour. Mrs. Gupta who seems to have suffered "an overdose of the government's banners and posters, and lost the capacity for normal speech" (Mistry 1996, p. 352) is pleased by the fact that the government has "incarcerated most of the parliamentary opposition, along with thousands of trade unionists, students, and social workers" (Mistry 1996, p. 73).

Mistry points out how bodily mutilation is an important part of the politics of dehumanization during the Emergency. Crushing, literal as well as figurative, is a recurrent motif in the novel. The fate of worms and cockroaches gets reflected in many incidents involving the characters being mutilated or crushed. Mantel (2000) compares Mistry to an out of control bus driver who will crush his characters. Trains and vehicles stand for the sense of order and smooth flow promised by the Emergency as, it is frequently highlighted, under the new system the trains are following a strict timetable, and anyone trying to violate this symbolic order is swept aside or crushed like an insect. At the very beginning of the novel, a dead body is found by the railway track. In another incident, Om and Ishvar get late for their job as there was a dead body on the track. This “equation of the railway with a preferred form of death is an instantly striking metaphor for a nation that runs over people while, itself, going ‘off the rails’” (Morey 2001, p.78). All the forces opposing the Emergency are brutally crushed. The student leader Avinash’s dead body is found badly tortured and mutilated. Later, Maneck comes across the pictures of the dead bodies of Avinash’s three sisters whose dismal economic condition forced them to commit suicides. On the day of her third wedding anniversary, Dina’s husband, Rustom Dalal dies in a roadside accident. Rustom’s “head completely crushed” after being hit by a “bastard lorry driver” (Mistry 1996, p. 45). Om’s bicycle, while he chases Dina, gets badly damaged. On his return from Dubai, Maneck sees a dog squashed by a truck (Mistry 1996, p. 581). On the other hand, Om and Ishvar’s bodies are mutilated through forced vasectomy. At the end of the novel, Maneck throws himself in front of a fast-moving train and gets crushed. Not wholly in a Kafkaesque sense, Maneck considers common human beings metaphorically transformed into bugs who have no worth in the modern capitalist India and who live only to be crushed.

Shankar’s death is indicative of how force is employed to deal with the excluded bodies. The Beggarmaster tells Dina and Maneck how Shankar’s wheeled frame flew “straight into a double-decker bus.... Both Shankar and the gaadi were crushed completely—not possible to separate the two. Removing the wood and castors embedded in his flesh would have meant mutilating his poor body still more. It will have to be cremated with him” (Mistry 1996, p. 501). Like his living body, Shankar’s dead body concretizes what Kristeva calls “the utmost of abjection” (Kristeva 1982, p. 4). Ishvar, with his amputated legs and same kind of wooden vehicle, is the re-incarnation of Shankar.

Through an abundant entomological imagery, *A Fine Balance* points out how the “logic of prohibition” (Kristeva 1982, p. 64) leads to the erection of symbolic boundaries between the so-called normal and the abject. Mary Douglas (2002) divides the living beings into three realms: water, earth and air. Any creature that “creeps, crawls or swarms upon the earth”, such as the snake or worm, does not belong to any of these three categories. Such creatures belong to the realm of death (p. 70). Dina’s journey through a slum brings about her encounter with the bodies of the slum people as abject and entomological beings. She sees slum people hauling a rope, slime dripping from their hands. A boy, tied to the rope, emerges out of a drain. The boy is “covered in the slippery sewer sludge”, and in sunlight his body shines “with a terrible beauty”. Dina covers her nose, seeing the boy’s muck-laden hair wave “like a crown of black flames”. She is overwhelmed by “the hellishness of the place” (Mistry 1996, p. 67). This incident serves to highlight the construction of the slums in the public consciousness as abject spaces standing outside the normal social order. Like cockroaches and worms, the slum people and the footpath-dwellers are forced to evacuate. When Ishvar asks Dina about the Emergency, she replies that the common people like them should not worry about it. (Mistry 1996, p. 75). But ironically, it is only the ordinary people who are most affected by the Emergency. The slum colony where the

tailors reside is demolished as a part of the beautification drive in the city. Rajaram tells the horrid details of the demolition to Ishvar. The poor tried to stop the bulldozers, but to no avail: “People were crushed. Blood everywhere” (Mistry 1996, p. 295). As thousands of people become homeless, they are more vulnerable to state violence, and physical and economic exploitation. They find themselves treated as lowly creatures by the authorities. Some beggars feel protected as they are hired by the Beggarmaster. They feel happy that they will have food and shelter and will no longer be harassed by police.

Dina’s disgust at the worms and bugs swarming her house reflects her earlier disgust at seeing the worm-like bodies of the slum-dwellers. They are symptomatic of the threat to the fragile independence enjoyed by her at her rented house. Home “is a site of purity--moral, spiritual, and physical--and is therefore to be kept free of contamination.... The presence of insects in the home threatens the purity of that home” (Candelaria 2006, p.13). Worms make frequent entries into Dina’s bathroom through the drain pipe as Maneck sees them “crawling out of the drain in formidable numbers... advancing with their mesmeric glide” (Mistry 1996, p. 202). He experiences sudden revulsion and disgust. Seeing Maneck’s fear, Dina demonstrates how he can handle the worms coming out of the gutter. She throws mugs of cold water on them, sending “the creatures sliding towards the drain” (Mistry 1996, p. 254). Then, she fetches a bottle of phenol and sprinkles the white fluid onto the remaining worms which transforms them into “writhing red mass, and then into little lifeless souls” (Mistry 1996, p. 254). The act of throwing water on the worms and sending them back to the gutter also reflects Dina’s behaviour with the tailors as she keeps treating them as strangers and outsiders. She even segregates their cups and glasses. The act of throwing water gets replicated later in the novel when Om and Ishvar are splashed with water by the policeman on the railway station. They have to move to a corner where the urine smell is so strong. So, like the worms, they find themselves literally in the gutter.

Towards the end of the novel, Maneck’s return to the city, after eight years in the Gulf, to see Dina and the tailors is marked by another encounter with worms. Seeing a lot of worms in a crack in the flagstones, he is reminded of his earlier experience with the creatures in Dina’s bathroom:

Worms were pouring out of it, slithering dark red across the rain-slick pavement. *Phylum Annelida*. Several had been pulped under the feet of pedestrians. Dozens more continued to emerge, gliding along on a film of water, undulating over the dead ones. While he watched, the gears of time slid effortlessly into reverse, and the busy pavement became Dina Aunty’s bathroom.... The crack in the flagstones was now almost depleted of worms, as the last stragglers dragged themselves to the safety of the gutter. (Mistry 1996, p. 599)

The worms crushed under the pedestrians’ feet foreshadow the imminent death of Maneck. The backward movement of the worms also stands for Dina’s loss of the flat and her journey back to her brother’s house, and the tailors’ backward journey to the city after Ishvar’s dream of getting his nephew married shatters as Om is vasectomized. The encounter with the worms also prefigures Maneck’s encounter with Om and Ishvar, who have been reduced to the level of worms: Ishvar’s legs amputated and Om pushing his uncle’s wooden vehicle. This life of begging is the only refuge for them from the brutality of Thakur Dharamsi who has not only destroyed their family but also turned them into worm-like beggars.

The vermin as well as the poor people cannot cross the symbolic boundaries that separate clean bodies from polluted bodies. “If disgust is a reaction to the imagined over-proximity or

intrusiveness of the disgusting thing, it creates (or attempts to create) boundaries and generates distance” (Tyler 2013, 22). This pollution-purity matrix is correlated to an elaborate system of social and economic hierarchies in India. Twelve years after her husband Rustom Dalal’s death, Dina discovers that the felt-lining of the case of Rustom’s violin is “in shreds, chewed to tatters by marauding insects” (Mistry 1996, p. 61). All these intruding vermin foreshadow many uncalled for intrusions into Dina’s domestic and personal space. When the tailors lose their residence in the hutment colony, they have to ask Dina for a small space in her house, but she considers them intruders. She asks them to leave their things by the door because she fears that the trunk “could be crawling with bugs” (Mistry 1996, p. 302). Mrs Gupta and Zenobia also advise her to maintain a distance from the tailors. When three kittens find a way into Dina’s kitchen, she does not want to let them stay. She feels that once they are fed in the house, they are never going to leave and she cannot take responsibility “for all the homeless creatures in the world” (Mistry 1996, p. 451). She is apprehensive that the kittens might be carrying disease-causing germs. Besides, there is an intrusion on the part of the rent-collector Ibrahim and his hooligans who vandalize everything in the house and inflict physical injuries on Maneck and Ishvar. Om and Maneck also intrude into the personal space of Dina during her absence. When she comes back, she is left speechless to see “the floor littered with the scraps of her carefully prepared sanitary pads, the two boys standing guiltily, clutching their embarrassing toys” (Mistry 1996, p. 287). Finally, in a replication of the expulsion of the worms, Dina finds herself thrown out of the flat on the orders of the landlord.

Fragility

Arya (2014) contends that by “crossing the boundary, the abject highlights the significance of its function, but also simultaneously draws attention to its fragility” (p. 41). Recurrent predation imagery underscores the fragility of the abjectified people against the predatory and discriminatory laws during Indira Gandhi’s premiership. Spiders and cobwebs serve multiple symbolic purposes⁷ in *A Fine Balance*. They exemplify the predation of the authorities as well as the fragility of the beggars and poor workers. Om and Ishvar are haunted by “the invisible threads clinging to their hands and faces” (Mistry 1996, p. 187) after they park their bicycle in a stairwell covered with cobwebs near Dina’s house. The irritation caused by cobwebs keeps their fingers “returning to their foreheads and necks to remove strands that were not there” (Mistry 1996, p. 187). The forces they are fighting against are visible and perceptible, but they cannot get rid of them. The Beggarmaster shows three drawings sketched by himself to Dina and Ishvar. One of the drawings represents the Beggarmaster with his briefcase chained to his wrist, “standing on four spidery legs” (Mistry 1996, p. 461). The Beggarmaster is like a spider as he weaves a cobweb of deception and power to trap the poor beggars. He is a parasite who lives on the earnings of his beggars. He tells Ishvar and Om that sometimes his “clients will vanish without paying” (Mistry 1996, p. 366) for his services, but he manages to find them, and makes them pay for their cheating. The spidery legs in the drawing also underscore his vulnerability as he is killed by the Monkey-man. When Maneck visits his late father’s shop, he observes cobwebs “shrouding the defeated apparatus” (Mistry 1996, p. 592) as their soft drink has gone out of demand. Later, during his visit to his hostel, Maneck sees “brown cockroach eggs, a dead moth, and a drowsy spider” (Mistry 1996, p. 498) in the water cans. The spider again stands for the political system that weaves a web of deceptive language to continue the undemocratic rule. The way the poor people are lured into getting themselves vasectomized also hints at the spidery nature of the system. The cockroach eggs suggest a tragedy being hatched for Maneck and the people around him. Dina’s relationship with Mrs. Gupta, Nusswan, Maneck and

the tailors also seems as fragile as cobwebs. As “death and destruction lurk at the centre” (Cirlot 2001, p. 51) of the cobweb symbol, Maneck’s lurking death is foreshadowed.

Flies as insects are emblematic of the underprivileged people as most of them live in wretched conditions. After his father’s death, Maneck sees a lizard that, time and again, makes sharp movements “to catch a fly” (585). He likens it to time preying on the feeble human beings:

Maneck decided he would go inside when the fading light made the creature disappear completely. He hated its shape, its colour, its ugly snout. The manner in which it flicked its evil tongue. Its ruthless way of swallowing flies. The way time swallowed human efforts and joy. Time, the ultimate grandmaster that could never be checkmated. There was no way out of its distended belly. He wanted to destroy the loathsome creature. (Mistry 1996, p. 587)

Despite his attempt, he fails to kill the lizard. The lizard also stands for the neoliberal growth of multinational companies that have devoured small local businesses. Farokh Kohlah’s business suffers because he refuses to change with time. The failure to kill the lizard may also represent Maneck’s failure to cope with the circumstances and his eventual death. This failed attempt may be contrasted with the assassination of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi at the hands of her Sikh guard.

The struggle of the low-caste Hindus against the upper caste is also analogized with the struggle of ants and moths. In Ishvar’s village, Dukhi and his son Narayan, who belong to the lowest caste of Chamaars, discuss the rights of the untouchables in the post-independence India. Narayan is greatly perturbed at the way the lower castes are treated by the upper castes. He speaks of the ideals provided by the constitution and law. As they are talking, Narayan’s mother lightens a lamp, and it attracts “a cluster of midges. Then a brown moth arrived to keep its assignation with the light. Dukhi watched it try to beat its fragile wings through the lamp glass” (Mistry 1996, p. 143). The inability of the moth is suggestive of the helplessness of the Chamaars in their struggle against the upper classes. The vulnerability of the moths against light symbolizes the struggle of the people like Narayan to break the status quo. But in the end, the whole family, just like the moths, gets literally burnt by the gang of Thakur Dharamsi. When Narayan talks about asserting his right to cast his vote, Dukhi points to the futility of all such efforts. At that point Dukhi sees and brushes “away a column of red ants marching towards the foot of the charpoy” (Mistry 1996, p. 144). Here, the ants stand for the untouchables and the down-trodden classes of India. However hard they struggle to gather and march for their rights, they can be brushed away with ease by the powerful sections of the society. The struggle of the four main characters of the novel also proves to be as futile as that of the ants and the moths. On arriving at the railway station, Maneck sees people moving like “ants trying to carry off a dead worm” (Mistry 1996, p. 225).

Infestation

According to Kristeva, the integrity of the self is challenged by equivalents of excrement like “decay, infection, disease, corpse, etc.” that “stand for the danger to identity that comes from without” (Mistry 1996, p. 71). Through rampant infestation and infection imagery, Mistry makes visible the body of Indian political and social system infested with corruption and injustice. Johnson (2015) notices “Mistry’s preoccupation with infestation, parasitism, and infection” (p. 157) in *A Fine Balance*. Parallels are drawn between human body, and the physical and political landscape of India. Maneck’s father thinks that “the broad vision of nation-builders and World Bank officials” (Mistry 1996, p. 215) is responsible for the “malevolent growth” (Mistry 1996, p. 217) that contaminates the body of the landscape in the foothill of the Himalayas. The city’s

slums are described as “scabs and blisters creeping in a dermatological nightmare across the rotting body of the metropolis” (Mistry 1996, p. 379). The political leaders, during their election campaign in Om’s village, claim to rid India of the “notion of untouchability” which is like a “disease that plagues the body” (Mistry 1996, p. 107) of their motherland. They pledge to do so in the true Gandhian spirit. But, once they get elected, they disappear with their utopian claims. The legal system of India especially during the Emergency is described in creaturely terms. The courthouse Dina visits for a litigation purpose is also described as a place that is “swarmed” and buzzing with all kinds of people. She sees lawyers prowling “among the crowds, hunting for cases” (Mistry 1996, p. 558). Dina laments that “bombast and rhetoric infected the nation, from ministers to lawyers, rent-collectors to hair-collectors” (Mistry 1996, p. 563). On their way to the hutment, Ishvar and Om see a large poster of the Prime Minister whose facial expressions indicate some creaturely presence on her body as the “eyes evoked the discomfort of a violent itch somewhere upon the ministerial corpus, begging to be scratched” (Mistry 1996, p. 181). Besides, Mistry presents Indira Gandhi’s own political career as an infection for the socio-political landscape of India as her government made many controversial decisions e.g. forced sterilizations and slum demolitions.

Many a time in the novel, insects and worms are the agents of infection and disease. Clark (1995) perceives some insects as “uninvited guests, parasites that insinuate themselves into houses” (p. 86). Such insects can be likened to the exploitative capitalist system in which some people with parasitical tendencies depend on the labor of the others. Peter Morey (2004) traces “a culture of parasitism...being fostered, symbolised in the extensive worm imagery” (p. 112) in *A Fine Balance*. Avinash finds signs of bedbugs on Maneck’s body on the latter’s first night in the hostel. Bugs on Maneck’s body symbolize the blood-sucking system that he comes across during his stay in the city as well as in his native area. A neighbor of Om and Ishvar in the hutment guides them about how to relieve themselves in a comfortable manner. He tells them that “squatting there can be dangerous” as venomous “centipedes crawl about in there”, and he does not want to expose his “tender parts to them” (Mistry 1996, p. 168). This proximity of the body to the poisonous creatures is suggestive of the creaturely level to which the poor slum-dwellers have been reduced. Later, the authorities treat these slum people just like centipedes and lice as they are considered to be a source of infestation against the beautification scheme of Mrs. Gandhi’s government. They are stripped off their humanity and treated like harmful insects that infest the body of the city.

Om’s infested body is a microcosm of the Indian nation of the time that is plagued by different social, moral and political ills. Om faces a threat to, what Kristeva (1982) calls, his “corporeal integrity” (p. 101). His body is invaded by different infestations that stand for the national body rotted by the blood-sucking politicians and businessmen. The lice in Om’s hair are a constant nuisance for Dina. She tells privately to Ishvar that the boy’s “health would improve if the parasite was eradicated” (Mistry 1996, p. 394). After Om’s lice are got rid of, the fear about worms in his stomach “wriggled out” (Mistry 1996, p. 475) as Dina observes that Om remains skinny despite eating a good quantity of homemade food. She gives him vermifuge to be consumed with food. Ishvar advises Om:

“If you eat, the worms eat. They need to be kept waiting hungrily inside your stomach, with their mouths wide open. So when you take the medicine, they swallow it eagerly and die.... If you are very tiny in the stomach, the worms will be like giant cobras and pythons. Hahnji, mister, hundreds of them swarming, seething, hissing around you.” (Mistry 1996, p. 475).

Maneck jokes that he could become a small creature and enter Om's stomach to shoot all the worms. After many visits to the WC, Om tells triumphantly that an eight-inch writhing small snake has made its way out of his stomach. Dina explains that Om was so thin only because the "wicked creature and its children were eating up your nourishment. Hundreds of stomachs within your stomach." (Mistry 1996, p. 476). She assures him that soon he will grow flesh on his body and will look healthy like Maneck. Later, Om's body is infected after the forced sterilization. He does grow fat, as Dina had said, but his fatness is out of proportion. As a parallel to Dina's plan to purge Om's body of lice and worms to make it healthy stands the government's plan to purge the body of the city of the poor people. Under the Twenty Point Program agenda of the Emergency, the poor people like Om and Ishvar are subjected to forced sterilizations. Om's castration and Ishvar's amputation stand for India's economic castration as all the claims regarding economic uplift prove false. Maneck's suicide and the wretched economic condition of Om, Ishvar and Dina at the end epitomize the failure of the economic goals promised by the Emergency.

The parasitical worms in Om's stomach stand for different social parasites. Mistry presents many human parasites. Dina is considered a parasite by Om as she devours all the profit: "She steals from us, not paying us properly, and also from the company" (Mistry 1996, p. 286). Mrs Gupta of Au Revoir Exports is the bigger parasite as she exploits a chain of people including Dina and the tailors. In Ishvar's village, the upper caste Hindus feast on the labor of the untouchables. The people like the Beggarmaster, the Facilitator and the police lead a life of parasites feasting on the earning of others.

Conclusion

This article on Rohinton Mistry's novel *A Fine Balance* has explored and explicated the entomological and verminous trope that is symptomatic of the miserable life of the downtrodden communities in India especially during the Indian Emergency of 1975. The research is based on the premise that the political and social powers attribute verminous characteristics to the unprivileged people in order to dehumanize them, legitimize economic and bodily violence against them, and expedite the process of their political and social exclusion. Employing Kristeva's theory of abjection and using extensive textual support, the article is attentive to how the untouchables, the homeless and the working classes were abjectified and relegated to the creaturely and insect level, both literally and symbolically, by the social, political and economic forces. The article has further zeroed in on the parallels that can be developed between the condition of different types of vermin and that of the helpless and homeless people during the Emergency.

References

- Arya, R. (2007). *Abjection and representation*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Brown, E. C. (2007). "Talking insects." *Antennae*, 10(1): 4-7.
https://www.zin.ru/ANIMALIA/Coleoptera/pdf/antennae_3-1.pdf.
- Calabrese, D. M. (2008). "Literature and insects." In *Encyclopedia of entomology*, edited by J Capinera, 2207-2211. Gainesville: Springer.
- Candelaria, M. (2006). "Biophobia: The verminous incursion into human cultural forms." PhD diss., University of Kansas.
- Cirlot, J.E. (2001). *A dictionary of symbols*. Translated by Jack Sage. London: Routledge.
- Clarke, B. (1995). *Allegories of writing: The subject of metamorphosis*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

- Douglas, M. (2002). *Purity and danger: An analysis of concepts of pollution and taboo*. London: Routledge.
- Egerer, C. (2016). "Insects, worlds, and the poetic in Coetzee's writing." *Textual Practice* 30(3): 493–508. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0950236X.2016.1158940>.
- Filipeczak, I. (2016). "Of worms and insects—Metaphors of the Human Condition in Selected John Updike's Novels." In *Proceedings of the 4th International Conference of English and American Studies*, edited by Crhova M. and Weiss M. Opava, 182. Opava: Silesian University Opava,
- Johnson, J. W. (2015). "Beggaring the nation": Bodily inscription and the body politic in Rohinton Mistry's *A fine balance*." *Studies in Canadian Literature/Études en littérature canadienne* 40(1):146-165. <https://journals.lib.unb.ca/index.php/SCL/article/view/24285>.
- Kellert, S. R. (1993). "Values and perceptions of invertebrates." *Conservation biology* 7(4): 845–55. <https://conbio.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1046/j.1523-1739.1993.740845.x>.
- Kelman, H. C. (1973). "Violence without moral restraint: Reflections on the dehumanization of victims and victimizers." *Journal of Social Issues* 29(4): 25–61. DOI: 10.4324/9781315086859-8.
- Kristeva, J. (1982). *Powers of horror: An essay on abjection*. Translated by Leon S. Roudiez, New York: Columbia UP.
- Mantel, H. (2000). "States of emergency." In *India: A mosaic*, edited by Robert B Silvers and Barbara Epstein, 181-93. New York: New York Review of Books,
- Mistry, R. (1996). *A fine balance*. London: Faber and Faber.
- Morey, P. (2004). *Rohinton Mistry*. Manchester: Manchester UP.
- Morey, P. (2001). "Terrible beautification: Body politics in Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance*." In *Unhinging Hinglish: The languages and politics of fiction in English from the Indian subcontinent*, edited by Nanette Hale and Tabish Khairpp, 75-88. Copenhagen: MT Press.
- Rother, A. (2017). "Becoming zoö-curious: Reading sexual differences in the field of animal life." *Humanimalia* 8(2): 87-107. <https://www.depauw.edu/humanimalia/issue%2016/rother.html>
- Slosson, A. T. (1916). "Entomology and literature." *Bulletin of the Brooklyn Entomological Society* 11(3): 49-52.
- Smith, D. L. (2011). *Less than human*. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Tarlo, E. (2003). *Unsettling memories: Narratives of India's 'Emergency'*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Thiyagarjan, N. (2016). "'Like words printed on skin': Desire, animal masks, and multispecies relationships in Monique Truong's *The Book of Salt*." In *creatural fictions: Human-animal relationships in twentieth and twenty-first century literature*, edited by David Herman, 193-213. New York: Palgrave-Macmillan.
- Tyler, I. (2013). *Revolting subjects*. London: Zed Books.