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“Beggaring the Nation”: Bodily Inscription and the Body Politic in Rohinton Mistry’s *A Fine Balance*

JAMES W. JOHNSON

DRAWING FROM HIS BRIEFCASE “a large sketchbook containing his notes and diagrams on the dramaturgy of begging,” the Beggarmaster displays before Dina, Ishvar, Om, and Maneck an “old pencil drawing” titled the “Spirit of Collaboration”: “Two figures, one sitting aloft on the shoulders of the other” (Mistry 437). “For this,” explains the Beggarmaster, “I need a lame beggar and a blind beggar. The blind man will carry the cripple on his shoulders. A living, breathing image of the ancient story about friendship and cooperation. And it will produce a fortune in coins . . . because people will not only give from pity or piety, but also from admiration” (437). Although this is one of several passages from Rohinton Mistry’s *A Fine Balance* (1995) in which the Beggarmaster, the powerful “manager” of Bombay’s begging industry, describes the disfigured bodies of Bombay’s beggars in terms of their potential profitability, this particular proposal is especially revealing. In it, bodies figure not only as the material evidence of suffering and privation but also as symbols that garner both pity and admiration through their ability to signify and tell a story. The reliance of the Beggarmaster’s scheme on the embodiment of meaning points to the broader function of the corporeal in *A Fine Balance*. Indeed, Mistry’s pervasive use of bodily metaphor and description reveals a fundamental concern with the representational capacity of the body, a capacity that is the result not of dramaturgical deliberation but of the historical and political processes of bodily inscription.

A number of scholars have registered the ubiquity of bodily metaphor and description in the fiction of Mistry. John Eustace offers a compelling argument for understanding the evacuative body and excremental representations in Mistry’s short story “Squatter” as generating “a positive political valency” (2). In his examination of Keynesian economics in *A Fine Balance*, Tyler Tokaryk offers a short but intriguing Bakhtinian

reading of the grotesque body; he asserts that the individual body in Mistry's work is subjected to "forces that transform it into a perverse analogue of the system of development economics" (21). Similarly, in his critical biography *Rohinton Mistry*, Peter Morey gestures toward the broader relationship between individual bodies and the body politic in *A Fine Balance*: "the bodily distress of the characters appears also that of the city they inhabit — and perhaps of the body politic more generally" (102). In spite of the wide critical recognition of the significance of the body in Mistry's fiction, however, only Morey has undertaken a direct critical treatment of the corporeal in *A Fine Balance*. In "Terrible Beautification: Body Politics in Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance*,"¹ he examines the allegorical significance of the body. Taking as his starting point Frederic Jameson's concept of "national allegory," Morey uses *A Fine Balance* to argue for "a more dynamic and cumulative" understanding of national allegories in India. "Individual texts," argues Morey, "are not in themselves self-contained allegories for the Indian nation" (*Rohinton Mistry* 182). Although he offers numerous compelling perspectives on the function of the body in the novel, including the potential for the body "to bear the signs of ethnic allegiance," he provides no sustained analysis of the body as the site of historical and political processes of inscription ("Terrible Beautification" 76). Nor does Morey explore the fundamental contradiction that undermines the Indira Gandhi regime in the novel, a regime that attempts to eliminate the abject bodies of its constitutive subjects while producing those abject bodies through its disciplinary methods and regulatory practices. Nonetheless, his recognition of the capacity of the body to bear signifying marks invites further critical analysis of Mistry's representations of bodies as inscriptive surfaces.

In *A Fine Balance*, recurrent images of deteriorating bodies create patterns that underwrite the narrative's cohesion and chart its progression. In addition, Mistry's representations of the body as an inscriptive surface problematize the attempts of the Indira Gandhi regime to depict the Indian body politic as a coherent, homogeneous, and corporeal totality. Images of deteriorating bodies, the production of docile bodies, and real and imagined instances of infestation and infection all contribute to a disjunction between official representations of the body politic and the images of individual bodies that populate Mistry's India. Thus, against the dominant state-sponsored narrative of bodily health,

purity, and homogeneity, Mistry offers a complex representation of India during the 1975-77 State of Emergency as a heterogeneous aggregation of interrelated but unique subjects whose bodies are operated upon by the destructive regulatory practices of the Indira Gandhi regime.

Mistry's complex representation of the corporeal in *A Fine Balance* readily lends itself to a critical examination attentive to scholarly discourse surrounding the narrative and symbolic functions of the body. The work of Peter Brooks, which examines the capacity of the body within the text — the narrative body — to convey meaning, offers an apposite framework for an investigation of bodily inscription in Mistry's fiction. Conceiving of bodies as inscriptive surfaces, Brooks provides a basis on which to explore the body in *A Fine Balance* as the site of historical and political processes that inscribe the bodies on which they operate. When resulting from the deliberate actions of the state, the same processes can be understood to correspond with what Michel Foucault calls "disciplines." These disciplinary processes manifest themselves in the novel as the policies and actions undertaken by the Indian government during the State of Emergency. The purpose and result of these regulatory practices are the production of what Foucault calls "docile bodies" — bodies that are both useful and obedient. However, in attempting to produce docile bodies, the same processes dismember, disfigure, and deform the bodies that they target. In turn, these seemingly imperfect bodies contrast with the political body, or body politic, depicted by the ruling Indira Gandhi government. This body politic comprises a social structure that, according to Elizabeth Grosz, assumes a "hierarchical organization" modelled on the "(presumed and projected) structure of the body" (46). Disrupting the coherence and stability of this social structure by challenging its cogency, the inscribed bodies of India's disenfranchised can thus be identified with Julia Kristeva's concept of the "abject body." Accordingly, the proliferation of abject bodies in the text and the perceived threat of overpopulation are evidence of the transgressive power that Kristeva identifies with abjection, that which "does not respect borders, positions, or rules" (4). These theorists provide a valuable theoretical apparatus through which to explore the inscribed and abject bodies of India's subaltern in *A Fine Balance*.

In the wake of renewed interest in the concept of the body as an analytical tool in Western discourse, various theorists have sought to

unsettle its usage in the analysis of non-Western societies. Use of the body as an analytical tool, they argue, is largely the result of wider beliefs in Western culture and of Western capitalism in particular (Turner 93). Thus, such critics suggest that by “adopting the body as an interpretive tool in South Asia the investigator is simply exporting a cultural product of late-twentieth-century Western society — the obsession with the body — to the non-West” (Mills and Sen 2-3). However, in the introduction to *Confronting the Body: The Politics of Physicality in Colonial and Postcolonial India*, James Mills and Satadru Sen respond to this criticism by stressing the historical and social significance of the corporeal in South Asia. A wholesale rejection of the body as a means of analyzing India, argue Mills and Sen, “is mistaken for the simple reason that the body was at the heart of systems of society, of metaphor, and of identity in South Asia long before Europeans came to have an impact in the region, and certainly long before Western academics began to explore concepts of the corporeal” (4). Moreover, it would be a mistake to presume that the differences between Western and non-Western conceptions of the body preclude an analysis based on Western theories of the corporeal. As Mills and Sen observe, “the ways in which South Asian communities have used their bodies to construct notions of rank, difference and gender and the extent to which they have made them social surfaces resemble activities in other societies, and comparative study may cast light upon all these processes” (6). Indeed, beyond viewing the body as an object for the discursive processes of social organization, the body in India has been seen “to provide a surface on which the whole world of messages [is] encoded and presented” (5). This concept of the body as inscriptive surface is one to which later Western theorists such as Brooks, Foucault, Kristeva, and Grosz have dedicated a great deal of theoretical attention. Rather than rejecting the work of Western theorists on the basis of dissimilarities, then, I will explore the body through the work of these theorists with the conviction that affinities between Western and non-Western conceptions of the body offer a productive ground on which to formulate a critical exploration of the body in the work of Rohinton Mistry.

In his specifically literary analysis, *Body Work: Objects of Desire in Modern Narrative*, Peter Brooks adopts the concept of bodily inscription in order to explore how the body is embedded in narrative. “Signing or marking the body,” writes Brooks, “signifies its passage into writing, its

becoming a literary body, and generally also a narrative body, in that the inscription of the sign depends on and produces a story" (3). In *A Fine Balance*, Mistry provides no shortage of characters whose bodies bear the marks of their lived experiences. If, as Eli Sorenson contends, "the whole novel is about how the intricate pattern of history . . . wraps its strings around the fates of the four characters," then it is the physical traces of those ties that enable the patterns of history to be read (125). Indeed, the integration of corporeality into the narrative underpins its structure and progression.

For Brooks, "Narratives in which a body becomes a central preoccupation can be especially revelatory of the effort to bring the body into the linguistic realm because they repeatedly tell the story of a body's entrance into meaning" (3). For Mistry, the body is made meaningful through narrative, but the narrative also gains coherence through its incorporation of the somatic. As *A Fine Balance* begins, the sudden lurch of the train on which Ishvar, Om, and Maneck are travelling sends their bodies crashing into one another, propelling the reader into the narrative and introducing three of the novel's four protagonists: the rural-born, Dalit tailors Ishvar Darji and his nephew Omkprash "Om" Darji, and Maneck Kolah, a young Parsi student who has come to Bombay to study. The physical description of these characters is the first in a succession of bodily images that proliferate as the novel progresses. As the narrative shifts its focus from this early encounter to the history of Dina Dalal, a widowed seamstress who eventually hires Ishvar and Om and lodges Maneck, the deterioration and destruction of bodies begin to feature prominently. In the second part of the novel, the slow and steady physical deterioration of Dina's mother is soon followed by the death of her grandfather, commencing a pattern of bodily deterioration that includes Dina's diminishing eyesight, the aging proofreader and former lawyer Vasantro Valmik's waning vocal cords, and the rent collector Ibrahim's increasing feebleness. The lurid details of the death of Dina's husband, Rustom Dalal, his "head completely crushed" after being hit by a "bastard lorry driver" (43), similarly begin a pattern of traffic accidents that continues with Om's bicycle accident midway through the novel and the particularly brutal death of the crippled beggar Shankar when he rolls into a busy intersection toward the end of the novel.

Apart from deteriorating or destroyed bodies, physical decline is reinforced by the material decay of inanimate objects. Rustom's violin,

for instance, is given a bodily association after his death, and when Dina pulls the instrument from its case its advanced state of deterioration evokes a strong sense of corporeal decomposition:

The soundboard had collapsed completely around the f-holes. The four strings flopped limply between the tailpiece and the tuning pegs, while the felt-lining of the case was in shreds, chewed to tatters by marauding insects. Her stomach felt queasy. With a trembling hand she drew the bow from its compartment within the lid. The horsehair hung from one end of it like a thin long ponytail.
(80)

This association between material deterioration and corporeal decomposition is repeated when Rustom's battered and rusted bicycle is finally returned to Dina by the police. Similarly, the disintegration of the folders of the rent collector, Ibrahim, and the rusting of the Beggarmaster's briefcase chain are two among countless examples of gradual decline that foreshadow significant events late in the novel — Dina's final eviction, Ibrahim's dismissal, and the Beggarmaster's death, respectively. The patterns that emerge from Mistry's careful attention to material decline, in addition to his liberal use of bodily description, thus underwrite the formal cohesion of the narrative. It is with the contrast between Ishvar's relative corpulence and Omkaprash's leanness that the novel begins, and it is with the inversion of this contrast that the novel comes to a close. Likewise, the novel is bookended by the appearance of bodies on the train tracks of Bombay: an anonymous body at the beginning of the novel and Maneck's body at the end.

In addition to charting a figurative course along which the narrative progresses, bodily decline evidences forms of bodily inscription that operate alternatively along the lines of caste and class. Outside the urban centres of Mistry's India, it is almost exclusively the bodies of Dalit Indians that function as sites of violence. Ishvar; his father, Dukhi Mochi; his brother, Narayan; and his mother, Roopa, are untouchables by virtue of having been born into the Chaamar caste of leather workers. In the rural village in which they live, the Dalit body inscribed by the violence inflicted by upper-caste members serves as a signifier of caste membership. According to Mills and Sen, "The organization of caste and rank provides important evidence [of the body as an object of social organization] as, despite all the diversity and contingencies, it has nevertheless returned constantly to the body as one of the key

means of differentiation, as the manifestation and center of ‘purity’ and ‘untouchability’” (4). Mistry’s description of the caste system confronted by Dukhi and his family serves to undermine such notions of bodily purity: “like the filth of dead animals which covered him and his father as they worked, the ethos of the caste system was smeared everywhere” (96). Identified with the rotting entrails and excrement of dead animals, “the ethos of the caste system” itself is depicted in *A Fine Balance* as fundamentally impure.

For Dukhi and his sons, caste differentiation is discernible by the staining and strong odour of their skin that result from leather working, “the trade to which they were born shackled” (101). The inevitable inscription of their bodies under the caste system thus reveals a contradiction that undermines Mahatma Gandhi’s dual commitment to abolition of untouchability and preservation of the caste system. For Gandhi, “untouchability is the product, not of the caste system, but of the distinction of high and low”; thus, “the moment untouchability goes, the caste system itself will be purified” (*Collected Works* 261). Asserting that the caste system “lends itself easily to reform,” Gandhi nevertheless maintains that the purity of the body is a precondition for the purity of the caste system (“Brahmacharya” 172). As Maneck later relates in *A Fine Balance* when quoting Gandhi to his activist friend Avinash, Gandhi “believed firmly in cleanliness — physical purity precedes mental purity precedes spiritual purity” (242). Because of their membership in the untouchable Chaamar caste, Dukhi and his family are unable to meet the basic standard of physical “cleanliness” necessary for “spiritual purity.” Furthermore, it is the means employed by the upper-caste Thakurs and Brahmins to preserve the caste system that leave the most salient marks on the bodies of the lower castes. Whipping and dismemberment, punishments for perceived insolence and the transgression of caste lines, leave unmistakable marks upon the bodies of the lower castes. Further subjugating lower-caste members by degrading their physical constitution and ensuring bodily “impurity,” these marks bear witness to the regulatory practices employed by upper-caste members to control and manipulate Dalit bodies.

Mistry’s portrayal of the regulatory practices that operate on the bodies of the lower castes in an attempt to render them obedient evinces what Michel Foucault describes as the production of “docile bodies.” “In every society,” writes Foucault, “the body was in the grip of

very strict powers, which imposed on it constraints, prohibitions or obligations” (263). A body is docile so “that it may be subjected, used, transformed and improved” (263). The notion of “docility” thus joins the “analyzable body,” that which is intelligible, to “the manipulable body,” that which is useful (263). In *A Fine Balance*, the specific punishments and rules imposed on the lower castes by the upper castes can be seen to produce docile bodies: “[T]he prime of [Dukhi Mochi’s] life had been spent in obedient compliance with the traditions of the caste system. . . . During his childhood years, he mastered a full catalogue of the real and imagined crimes a low-caste person could commit, and the corresponding punishments were engraved upon his memory” (96-97). The bodies of the Chaamars are intelligible by the specific marks and traces left by their physical labour and by the disfigurements inflicted by the upper castes. Similarly, the same rules governing the types of labour that they are allowed to perform, and the same punishments exacted for inefficiency, render their bodies useful and obedient.

In the village beside the river, obedience rather than utility is paramount to preservation of the caste system. The subjection of lower-caste bodies enables their utility. After Ishvar and Om’s departure from the village, the fate of Narayan, Ishvar’s brother and Om’s father, seems to confirm Foucault’s contention that “discipline dissociates power from the body” (264). Thakur Dharamsi, a powerful upper-caste landowner, utilizes the lower-caste villagers in order to obtain their thumbprints and steal their votes. When Narayan attempts to assert his right to vote, Thakur Dharamsi has him brutally tortured and then hanged in the village square. Rendered utterly powerless, Narayan’s body is nevertheless useful to Thakur Dharamsi since it contributes to the further subjection of those who witness his death.

As the narrative shifts from the rural village by the river to the city of Bombay, adherence to the rigidity of the caste system diminishes, but the regulatory practices of authoritarianism do not. In fact, the physical violence that inscribes bodies under the caste system prefigures the exploitation and abuse of bodies in the State of Emergency. In Bombay, it is not strictly the lower castes but the lower classes more generally that are subjected to the regulatory practices that operate on, and consequently inscribe, the body. The marks left on the bodies of the disenfranchised as a result of forced sterilization, part of the government’s “family planning” program implemented to combat overpopu-

lation, are evident not only in the scars left by the specific vasectomy and tubal ligation operations but also in the resulting complications. The amputation of Ishvar's legs, the result of an infection caused by the vasectomy that Ishvar receives toward the end of the novel, marks his body, yet again, with the history of oppression and violence to which he has been subjected, and Om's castration not only removes his ability to have children but also drastically alters his bodily schema. Once thin and nimble, by the novel's epilogue Om has become overweight and lumbering, the result of his castration in the sterilization camp overseen by Thakur Dharamsi. Thus, control over the body through both direct and indirect manipulation of its constitution leaves indelible traces. Directed at Bombay's indigent slum and pavement dwellers, the government's "family planning initiative" imprints itself principally on the bodies of India's lower classes.

It is the Beggarmaster's industry of beggary that comprises the novel's most extreme example of somatic docility. Not only does the Beggarmaster transform already disfigured bodies into docile bodies by maximizing their potential to evoke pity, but also he creates disfigurements by manipulating the bodies of the healthy. Infants and young children, such as the niece and nephew of the Monkeyman, a street performer who lives in the same Bombay slum as Ishvar and Om, are sent away for "professional modification" (447). These modifications, however, are nothing more than horrific mutilations. After being caught sleeping in the streets by the police, Ishvar, Om, and a large group of pavement dwellers are rounded up and driven to a rural construction site, part of the government's irrigation project, where they are forced to perform hard labour. As the tailors are driven out of Bombay and toward the irrigation project, Shankar, the Beggarmaster's most prized and severely disfigured beggar, describes to Ishvar and Om the relationship between mutilation and profit: "[P]utting a baby's eyes out will automatically earn money. Blind beggars are everywhere. But blind with eyeballs missing, face showing empty sockets, plus nose chopped off — now anyone will give money for that" (323). The clinical vocabulary adopted by the Beggarmaster, in addition to his meticulous study and documentation of the relationship between the beggars' bodies and their profitability, provides a paradigmatic instance of manufactured docility. Furthermore, though the begging industry predates the State of Emergency, the emphasis on discipline and commerce by state

authorities during that period allows for the institutionalization of the Beggarmaster's enterprise. Indeed, the disciplinary policies and programs implemented by the government under the auspices of the State of Emergency aim to effect the same sort of docility among India's lower classes that the Beggarmaster produces through his mutilation of beggars' bodies.

According to Tokaryk, Mistry's novel is forthright about presenting "the begging industry . . . as the effect . . . of a number of complex social, economic, and political discourses — the same discourses that generate such generous profits for Nusswan and other members of the economic elite" (24). Although the Beggarmaster's business most clearly illustrates how the practices justified by this discourse inscribe the bodies of those whom it subjugates, his use and manipulation of bodies parallel the broader initiatives undertaken by India's economic and political elite during the State of Emergency. Accordingly, the actions of both private industry and the state illustrate an attempt to perfect the production of docility through the use of what Foucault calls "disciplines," the "methods which made possible the meticulous control of the operations of the body" and assured "the constant subjection of its forces" (262).

After Bombay's slum dwellers are corralled into buses and driven out to a rural political rally against their will, they are forced to sit silently through countless speeches extolling the virtues of the State of Emergency. Although the vast majority of attendees are there unwillingly, or for the snack that they are promised by the rally organizers, the sycophantic member of parliament for the district calls on the journalists to take note of the number of people who have gathered in support of the prime minister: "Observe: wherever the Prime Minister goes, thousands gather from miles around to see her and hear her. Surely this is the mark of a truly great leader" (261). Gathered together to create the impression that the prime minister has the support of India's rural villages, the bodies of those in attendance have been made useful through their mere presence.

When Indira Gandhi finally speaks, her message is telling: "The need of the hour is discipline — discipline in every aspect of life" (263). The reluctant spectators give little thought to the prime minister's instruction, but those whose interests are directly served by the docility of the underclass — for instance, moneyed entrepreneurs such as Dina's older brother, Nusswan Schroff — enthusiastically endorse Gandhi's

aphorisms. Mrs. Gupta, Dina's employer and the owner of Au Revoir Exports, is among those entrepreneurs who frequently parrot the prime minister's precepts: "The Need of the Hour Is Discipline' — that's the Prime Minister's message on the poster. . . . It wouldn't be a bad idea to stick a few posters on the Au Revoir entrance. Look at those two rascals in the corner. Chatting away instead of stacking my shelves" (74). Although her injunction for discipline seems to be strictly verbal, her support for state-sponsored sterilization and forced labour makes her complicit in those practices that abuse the bodies of India's subaltern subjects: "Thank God the Prime Minister has taken firm steps" (74). Ironically, the marks on the body left by these disciplinary methods undermine the efficacy of the state's regulatory practice. Although it is the aim of discipline to render bodies docile, the bodily inscription that disciplinary action performs on its targets creates, paradoxically, abject bodies perceived to threaten and destabilize the social order of India, a social order also portrayed as a body in need of purification. Although primarily aimed at the preservation of dominant and authoritarian systems of control and exploitation, the subjugation of individual bodies in the State of Emergency also figures as an attempt to separate a conception of the nation as body from its individual constitutive subjects. In her article "Bodies-Cities," Elizabeth Grosz argues that "the body politic, whatever form it may take, justifies and naturalizes itself with reference to some form of hierarchical organization modeled on the (presumed and projected) structure of the body" (46). Perhaps it is not surprising that the Indira Gandhi regime employs the corporeal rhetoric of cleanliness and beauty in order to depict the marked and often disfigured body of the subaltern as a threat to the purity of the Indian body politic.

Even before the State of Emergency is declared, depictions of the Indian body politic as a corporeal body in need of purification are employed by government officials. Leaders from the Indian National Congress are the first in the novel to somaticize India's tribulations when they deliver a speech on Indian independence to the rural village dwellers: "How can we begin to be strong when there is a disease in our midst? First we must be rid of this disease that plagues the body of our motherland" (107). After the subsequent ascent of Indira Gandhi and the declaration of the State of Emergency, the same metaphors of infection and purgation are used to justify the project of beautifica-

tion, a government program aimed at “beautifying” the city of Bombay. Slogans such as “FOOD FOR THE HUNGRY! HOMES FOR THE HOMELESS!” and “THE NATION IS ON THE MOVE!” present an ironic and cynical facade for the destruction of Bombay’s slums and the removal of beggars and pavement dwellers from the city (299).

According to Morey, Mistry’s negative depiction of slum clearances and mass sterilization serves as an indictment against “a body politic, which attempts to perfect the larger body of India by getting rid of its anonymous imperfect bodies and preventing their proliferation” (182). Morey’s description of the body politic “ridding” itself of countless unwanted and “anonymous imperfect bodies,” a description that sounds like pest control, is particularly apt given Mistry’s preoccupation with infestation, parasitism, and infection. The poisonous centipedes that endanger those who would risk defecating in the bushes along the edge of the Bombay slum where Ishvar and Om live, the bedbugs and cockroaches that Maneck encounters when he first arrives at the college hostel in Bombay, and the lice that Dina notices on Om’s scalp are a few of the novel’s more prominent images of infestation. One of the earliest significant encounters with pests occurs when Maneck first washes himself in Dina’s bathroom after moving to her house from the college hostel. Peering around the bathing area, he is disgusted at the sight of worms “crawling out of the drain in formidable numbers, stringy and dark red, glistening on the grey stone floor, advancing with their mesmeric glide” (200).

In addition to recalling the already prevalent representations of decay and death, the worms that Maneck encounters in Dina’s bathroom prefigure later images of parasitism. Within the first week of the tailors’ arrival at her house, Dina begins to suspect that Om is infected with worms: “apart from Omkaprash’s skinniness and his constant complaints about headaches and hunger, she frequently spied his fingers relieving an itch in his fundament; and that, she felt, was evidence as conclusive as any” (79). Her suggestion becomes a source of humour for most of the novel, but after her suspicion “wriggle[s] out again” she purchases a purge for Om, and her suspicions are proven correct. The “small snake” that emerges from him “wriggling madly” is viewed with comical derision: “That wicked creature and its children were eating up your nourishment. Hundreds of stomachs within your stomach” (465). The government’s adoption of similar terms of infestation and purgation

to describe removal of the marginalized beggars and pavement dwellers of Bombay, however, is given a far more solemn association. If, as Grosz suggests, the presumed structure of the body provides a model for how hierarchical social structures are organized, then the discourse of infestation situates the bodies of the disenfranchised outside and in opposition to this structure yet at the same time within the bodily structure, and they are deemed inappropriately so — parasites to be purged.

The numerous instances of real infestation in the novel parallel the government's characterization of a pestilence perceived to be afflicting the body politic. When the Beggarmaster arrives at the irrigation project to "relieve [the foreman's] crippling labour problems," and to retrieve Shankar, suggestively nicknamed "Worm," the vocabulary used to describe the beggars in the camp is revealing. Settling on a price for removal of the disabled and disfigured beggars from the camp infirmary, the facilitator tells the Beggarmaster, "two thousand is okay, you can take your Worm. . . . And any bugs or centipedes that you like" (359). The density and proximity of bodies littering the streets of Bombay reinforces the sense of infestation fostered by government discourse: "The pavement dwellers began emerging through the gathering dusk. . . . Within minutes, huddled bodies had laid claim to the concrete. Pedestrians now adapted to the new topography, picking their way carefully through the field of arms and legs and faces" (307). It is in response to this "invasion" of the streets — an invasion that is the direct result of the government's slum clearances — that the government initiates its project of urban "beautification."

Beautifying and purging the city of its dispossessed and destitute residents are part of a broader project aimed at population control. The government's sterilization project is framed as a cure for a potentially fatal affliction of the body politic. Speaking to his assistant, the administrator of one forced sterilization camp advises that "We have to be firm with the doctors. If it is left to them to fight the menace of the population explosion, the nation will drown, choked to death, finished. . . . So it's up to us to make sure the war is won" (523). Situated within a discourse of pathology, India's destitute become the target of a violence framed by official discourse as an eradication of a virulent disease endemic to India. As such, these subaltern subjects are imagined as both within India and separate from the Indian body politic.

The Indira Gandhi regime in the novel is able to justify the elim-

ination of India's marginalized by framing it as a form of pathological cure for the infirmity of the nation. In fact, the disciplinary practices of the state have roots in the psychiatric regimes of the British in colonial India. In "Body as Target, Violence as Treatment: Psychiatric Regimes in Colonial and Postcolonial India," James Mills contends that the psychiatric practices established in colonial India under the British aimed to cure the mentally ill by first detaining, controlling, and reforming the body (82). To achieve this aim, British clinicians and physicians performed "carefully planned physical assaults on the body that [were] justified by the language of therapy and cure" (96). These medical practices, Mills argues, persisted after the departure of the British colonizers from India: "the violence has continued within the asylum walls in the post-independence period in spite of the fact that the colonial power relations that legitimated it and that explained it have withered" (97). Although the mass sterilization in *A Fine Balance* differs from colonial psychiatric regimes, its target and purpose are the same. Both take as their target the body of the subaltern and as their ostensible purpose the cure of a perceived disease.

Mills's observations are thus particularly germane to the pathologization of India's disenfranchised as depicted by Mistry in *A Fine Balance*. However, the mass sterilization project of the novel is portrayed less as an attempt to "reform" and "cure" the individual bodies of the Indian populace than an attempt to preserve the Indian body politic by eradicating the potential offspring of its most undesirable citizens through eugenics. Eschewing the vague rhetoric of "family planning," Dina's brother, Nusswan, is explicit about how he believes the government should proceed when he asks Dina, "What kind of lives do they have anyway? They sit in the gutters and look like corpses. . . . [A]t least two hundred million are surplus to requirements, they should be eliminated" (366). The notion of "surplus" once again alienates the poor and homeless from the Indian body politic. Indeed, the bodies of the disenfranchised, "like corpses," seem to imperil the well-defined political anatomy of India, prompting the country's elite to advocate for their extermination.

As bodies that contest and challenge the social order of Indian society under the State of Emergency, the disfigured and deformed bodies of the subaltern in *A Fine Balance* can be identified with what Julia Kristeva calls "abject bodies." In her seminal work *Powers of Horror*:

An Essay on Abjection, Kristeva formulates a theory of abjection in which the abject body, degraded and debased, offers a form of resistance. The abject represents the threat that meaning is breaking down. Furthermore, the abject is “what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules” (4). Kristeva’s assertion of the transgressive properties of the abject body is variously confirmed throughout the text. The government is unable to effectively control the abject bodies that its own regulatory practices have produced. The frustration of Bombay’s policemen during the funeral march for Shankar at the end of the novel is especially revelatory of the capacity of abject bodies to defy state power. Attempting to speed up a procession of beggars, Bombay’s traffic constables are at a loss when their disciplinary methods fail to evoke a response: “[T]hey waved their arms, tooted their whistles, shouted and pleaded, gesticulated, grimaced, clutched their foreheads and shook their fists. But these tried and true methods were employed in vain: absent limbs could not respond no matter how piercing the whistle or vigorous the wave” (495).

The threat to state control created by the presence of abject bodies is not confined to specific instances in which abject bodies appear. More broadly, abjection contests the circumscribed area of the state itself. The abject, writes Kristeva, “lies outside, beyond the set, and does not seem to agree to the latter’s rules of the game. And yet, from its place of banishment, the abject does not cease challenging its master” (2). In *A Fine Balance*, abject bodies are conceived of as being “outside” or discrete from the Indian body politic even while being geographically located in the heart of Bombay. Defying delimitation, the proliferation of abject bodies threatens to overwhelm the well-defined boundaries of the nation-state, portending what one administrator suspects will be “the end of our civilization” (523). The fear of overpopulation expressed throughout the text thus becomes the fear of an infestation from within and the dissolution of the borders that define the nation-state itself.

To rationalize the discourse of infection and infestation used to justify the extermination of abject bodies, the government must depict the body politic as otherwise healthy and formidable. Indeed, the government goes to great lengths to portray Indira Gandhi as the embodiment of purity and health, echoing President Dev Kant Barooah’s 1974 proclamation that “India is Indira and Indira is India” (qtd. in Gupta 428). Gandhi appears in person only once in the novel, dressed in a “white

sari” and with “eighteen garlands engulfing her face” (260), but she is omnipresent throughout the novel through the images and dictums disseminated by the government. Moreover, the government’s attempts to propagate images of India as a healthy, pure, and powerful body are epitomized by the ubiquitous billboard image of Indira Gandhi. The same image, however, betrays the corruption of the body politic:

Her cheeks were executed in the lurid pink of cinema billboards. Other aspects of the portrait had suffered greater infelicities. Her eyes evoked the discomfort of a violent itch somewhere upon the ministerial corpus, begging to be scratched. The artist’s ambition of a benignant smile had also gone awry — a cross between a sneer and the vinegary sternness of a drillmistress had crept across the mouth. (181)

The various blemishes and imperfections apparent in the portrait of the prime minister are indicative of deeper contradictions that reveal the fundamental illogic of the Indian regime during the State of Emergency.

Just as the body politic is depicted through the image of Indira Gandhi as healthy and formidable, so too is industrial development portrayed as the path toward prosperity. The effect of rapid modernization undertaken by the government is proclaimed by the dignitaries visiting the novel’s “mountain village” as the growth of the nation. Maneck, his family, and the other residents of the village, however, see the developments as a corporeal deterioration of the region, a “malevolent growth” that disfigures and inscribes the mountain: “The forests were being devoured for firewood; bald patches materialized upon the body of the hills. . . . [Mr. Kolah] was not alone in being appalled by this hideous rape” (215). This characterization of the government’s industrial development continues throughout the novel. Bombay’s slums, described as “scabs and blisters creeping in a dermatological nightmare across the rotting body of the metropolis” (373), are, after all, the unintended consequence of urbanization and industrialization. The false promises of affluence offered by Bombay persist, however, even as the beggars are being driven out of the city against their will: “In a huge city like this,” remarks one anonymous pavement dweller to Ishvar, “there is work even for a corpse” (323).

The irrigation project reveals the full extent of the government’s absurdity. While the facilitator decries the “beautification police” for indiscriminately corralling disfigured and immobile beggars, the work

that the beggars are forced to perform at the irrigation project results in their incapacitation. Furthermore, by forcing the city's beggars into unpaid work, the government displaces the paid workers previously responsible for the irrigation project, leaving them unemployed. Thus, in addition to symbolically "beggaring the nation" by degrading its ecological and geographical body, the government's policies are literally "beggaring the nation" by contributing to the proliferation of impoverished citizens (296).² These contradictions reveal how the regulatory practices under the State of Emergency produce the abject body that the hegemon attempts to efface. Yet this production of the abject body is also the inscription of marginalized bodies, bodies whose marks serve as an indictment against proclamations of progress, growth, and purity in official representations of the Indian body politic.

The physical embodiment of these contradictions culminates with the sudden exposure of Shankar's dismembered and mutilated corpse. Initially covered by a "sheet . . . and a blanket of fresh flowers," his severed appendages are scattered across the street when a small contingent of riot police attacks the beggar's funeral procession: "They were mistaken for political activists in fancy dress — troublemakers indulging in street theater, portraying government figures as crooks and criminals intent on beggaring the nation" (296). The procession was never intended to make such a statement, nor is it the result of the Beggarmaster's dramaturgy. Nevertheless, the mistake is a testament to the power of bodies not only to signify but also to offer a potentially oppositional resistance to the hegemony of state discourse.

For Kristeva, the most effective literature is that which exposes the abject: "Because it occupies its place, because it hence decks itself out in the sacred power of horror, literature may also involve not an ultimate resistance to but an unveiling of the abject: an elaboration, a discharge, and a hollowing out of abjection through the Crisis of the Word" (218). Mistry's fiction demonstrates how this incorporation of the abject body into the text can provide literature with an oppositional potential, creating what Hanjo Berressem has called a "unilateral writing space, a surface on which sexual and social objects/abjections can become speakable/readable" (31). Part of this readability arises from the fact that abjection in literature need not produce disgust alone but can also serve a cathartic function, producing sympathy as well as "the cathartic emotions of pity and fear" (Mueller 260). Accordingly, the

subversive potential of “abject texts” arises not only from their ability to “call attention to what societies have excluded and suppressed in order to define themselves” but also from their ability to produce a profoundly emotional response (Booker 148). Nevertheless, while scenes of abjection in *A Fine Balance* frequently evoke such an emotional response, for Mistry the mere presence of abject bodies does not disturb the social order as fundamentally as it does for Kristeva and other theorists of the abject. Rather, the abject body signifies dissidence and resistance when it exposes the inscriptions left by the regulatory practices of the state.

As Brooks contends, the body acquires its signifying potential through its entrance into the text: “Getting the body into writing is a primary concern of literature throughout the ages. And conversely, getting writing onto the body is a sign of the attempt to make the material body into a signifying body” (1). In *A Fine Balance*, it is the abject body situated within and inscribed by specific historical and political processes that threatens to upset the stability and certainty of power. Thus, the unusual character of Shankar’s funeral procession and its occurrence within the historical and political climate of the State of Emergency transforms the abject bodies of the beggars into subversive signifiers that undermine government representations of the body politic. The sight of Dina intermingling with the abject bodies of the beggars in Shankar’s funeral procession educes repulsion from Nusswan: “Nusswan opened and shut his mouth: opened in exasperation, then shut, in horror, becoming aware of the procession’s character” (497). If the abject body is the manifestation of state corruption, then the sudden exposure of Shankar’s disarticulated form challenges the totalizing national discourse that posits the homogeneity and purity of the body politic.

According to Kapur, “There is in India an unstated problem of depicting an Indian body intra-culturally, that is, in terms of the internal differences that fissure any totalising sense of the nation” (137). Mistry, however, circumvents this problem by positing an alternative conception of place that eschews uniformity and absoluteness. In *A Fine Balance*, when Ishvar and Om first arrive at her apartment, Dina views them with suspicion: their “inch long nails,” Ishvar’s “disfigured cheek,” and Om’s “skeletal figure, sharp and angular,” become sources of suspicion and concern (75). As the stories that these inscriptions provoke are borne out in the narrative, however, her concern about the completion of the clothing orders is subordinated to her genuine

concern for the well-being of the tailors: “she read the deterioration in their haggard faces, [and she] feared for their health” (305). For Brooks, “the sign imprints the body, making it part of the signifying process,” and “it is the body marked in a significant moment of the person’s past history that enables recognition” (3). In *A Fine Balance*, the initial recognition enabled by the presence of the sign on the body gives way to the disclosure of narrative and to the sharing of the individual histories signified by inscribed bodies. The tragedy that befalls the protagonists of the novel seems to challenge Vasantro Valmik’s claim that “to share the story redeems everything” (Mistry 594). Nevertheless, the potential for individuals to establish meaningful relationships across cultural, ethnic, and religious divisions through the sharing of their stories seems to suggest an alternative to either the homogeneous totality endorsed by official representations of India under the State of Emergency or the fissured and fractured body politic described by Kapur. Rather, Mistry seems to suggest that it is only through an awareness of the diffuse interrelationships among individual subjects that we can begin to imagine the complex and heterogeneous network of linkages of which the nation is comprised.

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NOTES

¹ Morey later expanded on this essay (see “Post-Colonial DestiNations”).

² See the following paragraph for a fuller version of this quotation from the novel.

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