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# SUB-ALTERNATIVE COGNITIVE MAPPING IN ROHINTON MISTRY'S *A FINE BALANCE*

PUSPA DAMAI

The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the "state of emergency" in which we live is not the exception but the rule. We must attain to a conception of history that is in keeping with this insight. Then we shall clearly realize that it is our task to bring about a real state of emergency. . .

—Walter Benjamin

## Forms of Life under the Emergency

There is hardly a text that can better illustrate Walter Benjamin's insightful remarks about "the oppressed" living under the perpetual state of emergency than Rohinton Mistry's novel, *A Fine Balance* (1995). Even though Benjamin's acclaimed essay, "On the Concept of History," uses the term "the oppressed" in a specific context, nevertheless, Mistry's narrative that has the 1975 Emergency in India at the center of the plot resonates with Benjamin's notion of the tradition of the oppressed and the necessity to bring about the real state of emergency.<sup>1</sup> Since the Emergency implies not only plenary power and absolute control but also a legal void, it presents itself as a totalizing map in which every move of the subject of such power is under surveillance and absolute control as if in a panoptic camp. Giorgio Agamben revisits and expands on Benjamin's concept of the Emergency, and argues that the terms "Emergency" and "the oppressed" should be substituted by "Exception" and "the bare life" or "*homo sacer*" respectively. By "*homo sacer*" Agamben means life that is devoid of all forms and characteristics of life and can be killed with complete impunity. Agamben thinks that the paradigm of government in the West has been exceptionalist, and by creating a totalizing biopolitical map resembling a concentration camp, this paradigm tends to produce the figure of bare life through the state of exception. Like Benjamin's concept of the Emergency, Agamben's theorization of the Exception focuses on the biopolitical significance of the state of Exception in which the Exception

encompasses, binds and abandons life to law, thereby producing the figure of bare life (*State 1-2*).

While Benjamin's and Agamben's theorization exposes bio-politics of the Emergency rule, which reduces a human being to a sacred being, Fredric Jameson's notion of cognitive mapping critiques the totalizing hold of capitalism, which obstructs human capacity to imagine one's position in the world including one's sense of who one is. In this essay I read Mistry's *A Fine Balance* in the context of theories of Emergency, exception, cognitive mapping, and city studies. After briefly contrasting Benjamin's and Agamben's theorizing of life under the state of exception, I examine Mistry's depiction of life during the Emergency rule in India in the context of Jameson's concept of cognitive mapping, which, I argue, needs to be expanded not only by engaging with theories of the exception but also by expanding it to include a number of totalizing maps that constitute the camp-like landscape of Mistry's novel.

Since the plot of Mistry's novel revolves around a nameless city under siege in the Emergency, and its characters attempt to form an alternative collective in response to the violence inflicted on them during Emergency, we must engage with Frederick Jameson's concept of cognitive mapping, which Jameson borrows from Kevin Lynch's notion of the image and intelligibility of the city. By cognitive mapping Jameson means human ability to create an intelligible map of the city one lives in and one's own position in it, which he thinks has been diminished by late capitalism. Individuals living in the late capitalist era of postmodernism cannot have a cognitive map of the totality of global capitalism because it operates transnationally. Jameson thinks that cognitive mapping is an aesthetic that involves *imagining* the place and the individual who occupy that place. In other words, cognitive mapping involves an alternative map to the transnational structure of late capitalism, which seeks to impose on its subjects, as in Benjamin's or Agamben's notion of the Emergency or Exception, a camp-like biopolitical structure. It is through the political art of cognitive mapping, Jameson notes, that individuals in late capitalism's totalizing map "begin to grasp our positioning as individuals and collective subjects and regain a capacity to act and struggle" (*Postmodernism* 54). Drawing from Benjamin, Agamben and Jameson's critiques of the totalizing maps that create exceptionalist political structures, in this essay I argue that Mistry's novel not only critiques the camp-like biopolitical structure created through the perpetual state of exception, it also suggests alternative ways to cognitively map, re-imagine and locate the lives of the

oppressed. Mistry's aesthetics of re-imagining life during the Emergency, which I call sub-alternative cognitive mapping, expands on Benjamin, Agamben and Jameson's critiques of both the state of exception and cognitive mapping.

Unlike the official history of India's independence, which, in Benjamin's characterization of all official Histories, would be a narrative of the empty and homogenous time, Mistry presents an alternative history of the oppressed for whom the state of emergency is a rule rather than the exception. *A Fine Balance* is the story of four main characters – Dina, the Parsi widow; Maneck, a student from the borders in the mountains; and Ishvar and Om, the untouchable tailors from a remote village; all belonging to several borders and margins at once – caught up in the whirlwind like Benjamin's angel of history. Dina's home where they all meet is the epicenter of the cartography of crisis they face. Dina struggles to save her flat, which in turn would save her from being a dependent once again on her chauvinist brother. The tailors, who escaped the wholesale holocaust of their family in their village, struggle to come to terms with their displaced and destitute selves in the city. Maneck tries to connect the dots between partition and modernization at home in the hills (which diminish the prospects of his family's business), government crackdown on student unions in his college in the city, and Dina and the tailors' tragic lives of which he is now a part. Not very unlike in Klee's painting, which for Benjamin exemplifies the state of exception often called History or progress, Mistry's protagonists have their face turned towards the past, where they perceive a chain of events consisting of a series of catastrophes piling wreckage upon wreckage. Like the angel, Mistry's characters would like to stay – Dina would like to stay with the memory of her parents and the deceased husband; Maneck with the memory of his life in the mountains before the Partition; and Ishvar and Om in their village ravaged by Thakur's violent killing of their kin. Again like Benjamin's angel, these characters would like to awaken the memory of the dead and try to make whole what has been smashed by the violence of history. But they cannot, for, as Benjamin would use the memorable image of the angel caught up in storm to illustrate the condition of the oppressed, a storm is blowing from everywhere; it has got caught in their wings with such violence that they cannot stop, or to continue with the avian metaphor, cannot close their wings. This storm (which is variously called in the novel partition violence, caste violence, religious riots, chauvinism, the emergency, police crackdown on the unions, forced sterilization, and the underworld) irresistibly propels them into the future to which their back is turned. As

the pile of debris before them grows skyward, Mistry's protagonists are forced to witness catastrophes, which they cannot even measure. Nor can they cognitively map the future towards which they are hurtled even though they might not have left any wings to fly with.

Dina, Maneck, Ishvar and Om's inability to map the wreckage and ruins of the past they are forced to stare at, and the unknown future towards which they have been flying with their back turned to it are conditions that bring us to the differences between Benjamin's description of the state of the oppressed under the Emergency and Mistry's account of the characters caught up in the whirlwind of the Emergency even before it was officially declared in 1975. And the difference is not just that Mistry conceives of the Emergency in spatial terms as if to examine the possibility or impossibility of cognitively mapping it, whereas Benjamin's point of reference is strictly temporal and historical. Another more significant difference surfaces regarding not the tradition of the oppressed, but the oppressed themselves. Whereas Benjamin thinks that the oppressed "have been endowed with a *weak* Messianic power," through which they can seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger, and they can blast out of the continuum of history (*Illuminations* 254, 255, 261); Mistry's oppressed seem not only to lack even a very weak Messianic power, but they also are tethered or abandoned to the continuum of history we call the exception. If Mistry's characters are not the redeemers or the messiahs, who with "a tiger's leap into the past" could make the past "citable in all its moments" (Benjamin 261, 254), they are not bare life either.

In other words, Mistry's narrative helps us situate the tradition of the oppressed somewhere between Benjamin's "agential messianism" and Agamben's bare life. If the agential messianism of Benjamin believes that even the oppressed possess messianic power, albeit a weak one, Agamben believes that bare life is a pure fact of life clearly separated from what he calls the form-of-life, or life "in which the single ways, acts and processes of living are never simply *facts* but always and above all *possibilities* of life and always and above all power" (*Means* 3.4). If Benjamin attributes romantic messianism to the oppressed, Agamben divests bare-life or sacred life (*homo sacer*) of all possibilities of life. James Muirhead, in his *Historical Introduction to the Private Law of Rome*, remarks that "*homo sacer*" was in every sense of the term – one with whom it was pollution to associate, who dared take no part in any of the institutions of the state, civil or religious, whose life the god would not accept as a sacrifice, but

whom, nevertheless, anyone might put to death with impunity" (17-18). From Muirhead's definition it is not difficult to see that Mistry's characters – especially the untouchable tailors with whom it is pollution for the upper caste Hindus and many others in South Asia to associate, and the beggars exposed to extreme form of violence – share with the Roman *homo sacre* characteristics that make them polluting, precarious, and sacred.<sup>2</sup> Like the *homo sacer*, the untouchables and beggars are the excluded and expendable life which can be killed with impunity. Yet they are not sacred in the same way, for they still seem to participate in the forms-of-life, which, a la Agamben, is not separated from the possibilities of life. The possibilities of their life include their ability to cognitively mapping life, and constructing an alternative collectivity against the ruins of family and community imposed by the perpetual state of emergency.

To cite just one example from the novel – after being threatened by the landlord's goons to evict, Dina in her final attempt to save her apartment visits the court only to be mobbed by a band of lawyers looking for clients. There she runs into Mr. Valmik, the lawyer, who tells his story – how he lost his eyesight proofreading a newspaper, which forced him to work as a sloganeer and organizer of demonstrations for a political leader. As a sloganeer too, he overspent his voice shouting slogans during demonstrations and he eventually lost it. When the Emergency was declared and political demonstrations were banned, the now muted sloganeer again found himself jobless. The lawyer's tale which "poured out from him like perfect seams, holding the garment of his story together without calling attention to the stitches" reminded Dina of her own effort at stitching the patchwork of her life together with the tailors (*A Fine* 554-555). In the circle that the lawyer says he completed from legal career, proofreading, demonstrations back to the courthouses, he has lost ambitious solitude, words, eyesight, and vocal cords. "Losing, and losing again," he adds, "is the very basis of the life process, till we are left with the bare essence of human existence" (*A Fine* 555). Yet this "bare life" to which not only the lawyer, but also all of Mistry's characters – Dina, Ishvar, Om, and Maneck – are reduced to, is also aware that there is always "hope – hope enough to balance our despair" (*A Fine* 553). The title of Mistry's novel – *A Fine Balance* – refers to this "fine balance" between bare existence and hope and potentiality of life. This fine balance differentiates them from Agamben's bare existence, and Benjamin's agential messianism, and from Jameson's subjects on the verge of disappearance and incapable of cognitively mapping their lives in late capitalism. The forms-of-life that Mistry's characters participate in, and

the cognitive map of the collectivity that they form render them unreadable and unrecognizable to the totalizing theories of agency, exceptionalism, and capitalism.

The unmappability and unrecognizability of the life of Mistry's characters differentiate them from the agential messianism of Benjamin and bring them close to Gayatri Spivak's notion of subalternity precisely because subalternity is "imbricated with the idea of the non-recognition of agency" where agency is understood as "institutionally validated action" ("Scattered" 476-77). Yet Mistry's characters cannot be mapped as subalterns either as the latter for Spivak are "removed from all lines of social mobility" ("Scattered" 475). If the subalterns are removed from all lines of social mobility, then they would be the same as Agamben's bare life, which is removed from all possibilities of life and power. Mistry's protagonists are always on the move. Dina moves back and forth between her brother's house (claimed exclusively by him after their father's death) and her husband's apartment, which she has no means to keep but by all means desires to do so. Maneck shuttles between the mountains and the city before deciding on a job in Dubai. Ishvar and Om always move from one slum or pavement to another in search of refuge. In fact, they are the bearers of all lines of social mobility. Without them Nuswan, Dina's brother, would not have a bourgeois lifestyle. Without their labor, a boutique in New York would not get cheap and exotic dresses for the metropolitan consumers. Without their expertise, a rich company in the U.A.E. would not be air-conditioned. They bear in their bodies the violent inscriptions of the state, the capitalist powers, and the multinational corporate.

If social mobility is institutionally sanctioned and a recognizable mode of action and agency no less recognizable is this intra- and inter-national division of labor, which, in "Cognitive Mapping" Jameson relates to the monopoly capitalism or the stage of imperialism. "[T]he truth of the experience" writes Jameson, "no longer coincides with the place in which it takes place;" rather the truth of a little experience in London "lies in India, Jamaica or London" ("Cognitive" 349). But what makes cognitive mapping impossible, for Jameson, is not just the fact that ever since its early stage – market capitalism – through its ascendancy during the second stage of imperialism down to its most totalizing stage – late capitalism – capital's tentacle are global therefore difficult to measure. Capital as a totalizing and systemic concept owes its unmappability to the fact that "no one has ever seen or met the thing itself" ("Cognitive" 354). This inability

to see, for Jameson, results in an intense problem of figuration often visible in the growing contradiction between lived experience and structure. This leads to "a situation in which we can say that if individual experience is authentic, then it cannot be true; and that if a scientific or cognitive model of the same content is true then it escapes individual experience" ("Cognitive" 349).

Jameson notes that these "new and enormous global realities are inaccessible to any individual subjects or consciousness" ("Cognitive" 350); and these realities remain fundamentally unrepresentable; yet writers and artists have consistently invented figures to express these realities, even when such an expression may just be a distortion. An example of such a distorted and symbolic representation is the "monadic relativism" found in the works by Conrad, Ford, Pirandello, and Henry James. These writers represent individual consciousness as a closed world in which "a representation of the social totality now must take the (impossible) form of co-existence of those sealed subjective world and their peculiar interaction" ("Cognitive" 350). So much so that impossibility of cognitive mapping in late capitalism entirely erases the individual subject leaving in its wake merely images of the subject. This disappearance of the subject is painfully exemplified, for Jameson, by the fate of the Black Revolutionary Workers of Detroit in the 1980s.<sup>3</sup>

Cognitive mapping in late capitalism is impossible both due to its global scope and its reduction of individuals, as is the case in literature, to sealed off monads unsuccessfully trying to form a collectivity. Mistry represents the monadic nature of individuals by depicting his characters as lonely, estranged, and even ostracized due to stigmas of gender, class and caste. Like Jameson's subjects of postmodern late capitalism, Mistry's protagonists at the end of the novel disappear or are reduced almost to the fact of life. However, it would only resurrect another totality to argue that capitalism is not the only factor responsible for it. Unlike Jameson, who thinks that capital is the only totalizing and unifying force for cognitive mapping, Mistry brings into play other systems or totalities such as state, religion, caste, chauvinism and nationalism. Thus a simple spatial analysis along the three stages of capitalism (market stage, imperial stage, and multinational or late capitalist stage) that Jameson prescribes for the aesthetics of cognitive mapping is not enough to read how economic, religious, social and political forces unite to create a camp-like space out of the city in the novel. If Benjamin and Agamben's analysis of the Emergency helps us extend Jameson's concept of cognitive mapping by



bringing in law and state, theories of Emergency too must be expanded to include cultural and social dimensions of the totalizing structures of the exception. It is imperative to unhinge cognitive mapping from Jameson's grand narrative of capital and concentrate on a sub-alternative cognitive mapping or sub-alternative aesthetic vision that not only helps construct a spatial analysis of culture, but generates a space for what remains of an individual subject in the wake of its disappearance in contemporary times. A sub-alternative aesthetic vision also helps us to theorize "collectivity," which can be, to borrow from Jean-Luc Nancy, an "inoperative community." Nancy defines "inoperative community" as sharing, by which he means the finitude of a singular being in which one appears at the end or at the beginning "with the contact of the skin (or the heart) of another singular being, at the confines of the *same* singularity, that is as such, always *other*, always shared, and always exposed" (Nancy 28). Sharing, contact with, and exposure to the other in finitude remain forever incomplete not in the sense of incompleteness of cognitive mapping in Jameson's postmodernism or the finitude of bare life in the state of exception. This inoperative community is incomplete in the sense that instead of being a monad one is always in contact or exposed to the other. In his or her finitude one always passes to the other. This passage of the one to the other is not what Jameson describes as the disappearance of the subject in the image. Nor is it what Benjamin calls the oppressed; nor still what Agamben calls the bare life. If disappearance of the subject or its reduction to bare life constitutes the totality of the postmodern late capitalism or the state of exception and makes cognitive mapping impossible, an "inoperative community" makes spacing possible by sharing through touching. It is through this sharing, and touching (sharing the apartment, touching the untouchables, being exposed to others' stories and lives) that Mistry's novel seeks to cognitively map an inoperative community of a fragile collectivity.

### Mapping Totalities

At least four totalizing maps dominate the landscape of Mistry's *A Fine Balance*. The first is the cartography of caste with its rigid lines and borders not to be crossed by the untouchables: if they did, the consequences would be what Narayan and his family underwent – being burnt alive by the guardians of purity, the caste Hindus of the village, especially Thakur. Om and Ishvar escaped this "holocaust" for they were away apprenticing at a tailor's in a town far from their village. Equally rigid is the map of gender with its own spatial boundaries of the domestic

and the public; propriety, proprietoriality, and morality. Dina is the living testimony of the consequences of trying to defy those boundaries. Not only that after her father's death, she was taken out of school, and was given only two options: to marry the person of her brother Nusswan's picking or to be reduced to the helping hand at her brother's household. The third totalizing map is that of religion, and *mutatis mutandis*, of nationality, which of course has its own laws. The consequences of not complying with those laws are as serious as we see during the Hindu-Muslim riots in town. Ishvar and Narayan were indirectly involved in the thick of the Partition and Independence politics while still under apprenticeship at a Muslim tailor's. The Hindus went on a rampage to cleanse the town of "Muslims traitors" together with "the chief traitor," Gandhi. As the killing spread all over the town, people with crude weapons, tridents, sticks and swords came to the tailor's hoping to find and dispatch the Muslim owner of the place. Instead they found two young boys, who claimed to be the Hindu owners of the shop. The furious crowd was not ready to give up. They demanded the pajamas of the boys be pulled down so that the boys could produce the "proof" of not being Muslims. When Ishvar and Narayan complied the men, in the light of the torches they brought to burn the Muslim family alive, bent down and looked at the boys' naked crotches to verify that "the foreskins were intact" (*A Fine* 130).

As we know, this is not the first time that crotches are the site of violent inscriptions in the novel; later in the text, Narayan's son, Om, falls victim to the same biopolitical violence, which makes the body site of violent inscriptions of power. This takes us to the fourth dominant map in the novel—the political map, which is a totalizing concept of the polis that also encompasses or grounds all other maps. This map of the polity manifests itself during the emergency, especially in the city, the nameless metropolis in which most of the story is set. These four totalizing maps multiply Jameson's unitary totality of capitalism; at the same time these maps overlap with one another. Thakur's caste violence in the village is what sets the untouchable tailors on an internal diaspora towards the city. The Emergency emboldens a chauvinist like Nusswan to propose a Hitler-style solutions for the unemployed, pavement dwellers, and the members of the union. In spite of the fact that for the oppressed the Emergency is the rule rather than the exception, it is only the unnamed polis where Mistry's characters cross path with the totalizing map of the polity itself – that is to say the official attempt to impose norms of citizenship, belonging, and individual subjectivity. The city also becomes the site where Mistry's characters attempt to construct an inoperative community.

Mistry's unnamed city by the sea is modeled after Bombay, which is now called Mumbai. Especially unmistakable is the split nature of Mistry's city: the "city proper" and the slums.<sup>4</sup> As in Shashi Shekhar Jha's descriptions of Bombay's *chawls*, *bastis* and *jhoadpattis* as degradingly subhuman and sub-animal settlements, Mistry details the subhuman condition of the slums and pavement dwellers, which is exploited by those in power during the Emergency to further strengthen their hold.<sup>5</sup> Arjun Appadurai holds the historical emergence of this split, which he locates around 1970s, responsible for what he calls "the spectralization of the city," or its de-cosmopolitanization from the highly "cosmopolitan city" of the 1950s. Ashis Nandy maps the split nature of Bombay on to the topography of human mind in which the slum functions as the unconscious or "the unintended city," that was "never a part of the master plan, but was always implicit in it" (Nandy 2). Unlike Appadurai and Nandy's "Bombay," Mistry's polis is always already under the Emergency (therefore always spectral and never fully cosmopolitan), and has more than one split, and more than one fragment. Mistry also shows that these totalities, whether they are cosmopolitan or psychoanalytical, exclude subalternative cognitive mapping that are always under erasure yet visible. In his novel *Such a Long Journey* (1991), published a few years before *A Fine Balance* (which first appeared in 1995), Mistry provides a sort of a prequel to *A Fine Balance* by recounting the journey of the Nobles around the time of the war in early 1970s in Eastern Pakistan that led to the separation of Bangladesh from Pakistan. In the context of this war, Mistry exposes the corruption at the heart of Indian Government, especially Indira Gandhi's dubious and crafty politics that led her to declare the Emergency. Mr. Noble, who literally limps his way to the center of corruption in Mrs. Gandhi's government, traces the initial blueprint for the cognitive map of the city in *A Fine Balance*. But unlike *Such a Long Journey*, which mainly focuses on corruption, and merely tangentially touches on questions of religion, caste, gender, class, and the Emergency, *A Fine Balance* dwells more extensively on these issues and provides a more comprehensive picture or map of the period.

Even though early 1970s was also the beginning of the exceptionalist politics in India, *Such a Long Journey* is not strictly about the Emergency. As in an interview Mistry clarifies, the year in *Such a Long Journey* is 1971. "It seemed to me," he explains, "that 1975, the year of the Emergency, would be the next important year, if one were preparing a list of important dates in Indian history. And so 1975 it was" ("How Memory"

3). *A Fine Balance* is not only historically located at the moment of the Emergency, but it also expands the scope of the event to include other forms of exceptionalist measures such as the ethnic and religious riots, Independence, and the aftermath of the assassination of Indira Gandhi. If Mr. Noble's "long journey" results from the exceptionalist cognitive mapping, Dina, Maneck, Ishvar and Om's attempt to construct a collectivity marks the beginning of a sub-alternative cognitive mapping.

In the chapter significantly entitled "Return of Solitude," all four main characters of Mistry's novel get together to reflect on the happy and sad days they spent together and interestingly they map their life on the multicolored cut-pieces stitched together as a quilt. Ishvar looks at the quilt to see how each piece in it is connected to the events of their lives; a square from it reminds him of "sleeping on the verandah. And the next square – chapatis. Then that violet tusser, when we made massala wada and started cooking together. And don't forget this georgette patch, where Beggarmaster saved us from the landlord's goondas" (*A Fine* 480). The two young men, Om and Maneck, decide to play a game with the quilt in which they have to locate the oldest piece of fabric and move chronologically, patch by patch, to more recent events. In the process of reconstructing the chain of their mishaps and triumphs through the corresponding pieces on the quilt they reach an uncompleted corner, which makes Om gasp: "We are stuck in this gap, [e]nd of the road" (481). Dina, the host, who hired the tailors, and gave them shelter in her flat, consoles that the quilt will be complete; only that they have to wait until new material comes with new order. Maneck suggests that the quilt does not have to be complete, they can keep adding new patterns and let it grow; to which she replies, "What would you do with a monster quilt like that? Don't confuse me with your quilt maker God" (481).

As we know, the new material never arrives, and all four of them never get together again as one tragedy after the other overtakes them. In a way the quilt continues growing with the accretion of each tragic event in their life, but at the same time, it remains forever incomplete. Unbeknownst to Dina, therefore, she has already become a piece in that monster quilt called the city that at once remains incomplete without ever ceasing to stretch and expand. It is in this sense of incompleteness and the negative space of the gap in the quilt that Om defines the city as a "story factory, that's what it is, a spinning mill" out of which is born the modern-day *Mahabharata* (*A Fine* 377). The difference between the Vishram – the tea stall where the tailors recount their stories to the waiters after every misadventure in the

city – edition of the *Mahabharata*, and the original one is that the Vishram version of the *Mahabharata* cannot be fully mapped out; it should not be mapped out. This sartorial metaphor reveals that their connectedness to the city as if their lives were invisibly sutured to the rest of the city. The negative space of the gap that they happen to inhabit is not only a dead end, but also the point of reflection, reconstruction, and sub-alternative cognitive mapping. It is this void that converts all legibility and imageability of the city into an impossibility of producing a complete cognitive map.

When we reflect on this incomplete space of the quilt, the loopholes of Nandy, Jha, Morris, and Appadurai's positions become glaringly visible as they betray the symptoms of those who seek to map the city as a unified whole to which everything else including the slums are appendages. Nandy's position, for instance, falls apart when we consider the fact that the slums, instead of being unintended byproducts, gradually developed over the years with the industrialization and the mass migration from the countryside both in response to the growing demand of cheap labor in the city, and also in reaction to India's "failed" independence when the resumption of power by the native elites only led to concentration of resources and opportunities in cities. Agreeing with Appadurai's argument that cosmopolitan Bombay of the 1950s disappeared with the onslaught of mass-migration and acute housing scarcity of the 1970s would subject us to the nostalgia that glosses over the tensions and conflicts involved in the making of the city at least since the early colonial era. Appadurai also gives signs of claustrophobia when he exclaims: "Slums and shacks began to proliferate. The wealthy began to get nervous" ("Spectral" 629). Such an apprehension of the slums eventually leads to the persecution of the "man of the crowd" in the name of exorcizing the specters of the slums. At the same time, Morris's and Jha's assessment that slums represent urban zoology, guided as it may be by a reformatory impulse, cannot take into account how even the expendable life of these "subhumans" is not free from the cruel economy of the city in which every piece of earth, including the dirt and the dead, is a commodity worth some value. The fact that even the bare life of the subhumans from slums could be commodified further points out the overlap and interface between capital and camps, and polis and the state.

It is to this cruel calculative economy that Ishvar and Om lose whatever arrangements they had made to spend the night after working for Dina. First the police demolished the hutment colony where they had a place.

When they rent out a pavement in front of a dispensary to sleep at night, the city beautification police (authorized by a decree during the Emergency to transport all beggars and pavement dwellers to the outskirts of the city as laborers) arrived one night and picked them up with the beggars and dumped them at the irrigation project known as “work camp.”

The work camp at the outskirts of the city is, however, not the end of the limits of the city. Like the agents of purity in the village, city beautification police wants to create a totalizing map of a pure city without beggars and the homeless. All of Mistry's characters know that the city is a no-exit city not simply because people who arrive find it hard to leave, but because even if they leave the city they are pursued by the same structure of legibility and mapping. Mistry's unnamed city is a global city as it partakes in the economy of New York where the clothes that the tailors produce is exported to, or of Dubai, where Maneck gets employed in the refrigeration business. The city extends its tentacles to the mountains where Maneck came from, or to the village where the tailors came from fleeing the violence orchestrated by Thakur. Thakur's agency for a totalizing map gets substituted in the city by Beggarmaster, the lord of the beggars, who describes himself as a businessman “looking after human lives” (*A Fine* 360). He not only owns the beggars, he also knows the art of begging. His notebook, that he always carries together with a suitcase in which he collects the bills and coins from his army of beggars around the city, is full of drawings and designs of the dramaturgy of begging. He knows what kind of style and pose of the beggar would yield more money, and what kind of tone or plea would best exploit public sentiments. It is in this sense we have to understand Beggarmaster's warning to the tailors that the consequences of violating what he calls his hospitality would be terrible. After making a contract with Beggarmaster to purchase freedom, the tailors get ready to leave the city beautification work camp into which they were forced by the beautification police. The condition of their freedom was that they had to pay Beggarmaster a certain amount of money on a regular installment basis. Warning them of possible default, Beggarmaster says: “Sometimes one of my clients will vanish without paying, after enjoying my hospitality. But I always manage to find him. And there is big trouble for him. Please remember that” (*A Fine* 360).

In a city not yet fully brought under the panoptic gaze of surveillance mechanisms, Beggarmaster's confident – “But I always manage to find him” – substitutes what Mike Davis has called regarding L.A. “the militarization of the city life” dominated by the physical security system of

the “Armed Response” (Davis 223). In purchasing freedom from the work camp, the tailors were unwittingly transferring from one camp to another, and from one form of panoptic gaze or totalizing map to another. Beggarmaster simply supplements the state-authorized work camp as he brings the ones he saves into his own exploitative and repressive camp controlled by the underworld. The ubiquitous Beggarmaster turns Mistry’s city into a carceral city in which the classical distinction between the state and the city vanishes and the space of indistinction that results is a pure zone of anomie or legal void. It is not difficult to see what Beggarmaster means by “looking after human lives” because for him a human life, devoid of any use value, is legible only in its exchange value, an object to be measured and mapped only in relation to the money it can bring. Beggarmaster’s grip on human life is, strange as it may sound, the tight grip of post-fordist capitalism that David Harvey describes as flexible accumulation “tightly organized *through* dispersal” (Harvey 159). It is flexible, regional, local, as Beggarmaster measures the value of each organ individually and lops off parts that are useless. To be more precise, he generates value out of what appears to be valueless; he knows how to draw the surplus out of the superfluous, or riches out of the refuse. Thus the simplistic binary between exchange value and use value does not strictly apply to his “care” of life in the same way as naïve distinction between the city proper and slums is not useful in mapping Bombay. He looks after life by taking from it all the characteristics of life. He tightens his absolute grip over the bodies of his subjects by dissecting, dispersing, and disabling them.

Despite their differences in arguments, for Appadurai and Nandy, Bombay is a unified, which means not only mappable but already well mapped out city threatened by a dark, unconscious, subhuman, ghostly, and above all, external force of the slums. Even their figure of “the other city” is eventually put on the map of the “city proper.” Keeping the city proper away from the menace of the slums necessitates this “inclusion” whereby the other is rendered completely legible and transparent. By portraying the proper and the other city as if it was the only split, and as if one side of that split was merely accidentally related to other, they successfully avoid the history of the divide that goes back to the beginning of the city. Before the city was “Bombay” or “Mumbai,” it was an archipelago of seven islands [with different names] out of which evolved the current island of the city through the modern feat of engineering involving rigorous construction and embankments that merged these islands into one landmass. The specter of division and incompleteness, however, continued

haunting Bombay even after successfully bridging the islands to form a unified landmass. A highly diplomatic transaction between the British and the Portuguese powers in 1661, especially the cession of Bombay by the Portuguese to the British as part of the dowry of Catherine of Braganza on her marriage with Charles II, was followed by another administrative and commercial transaction according to which the city was handed over to the East India Company in return of a nominal annual payment. Thus renting, one of the dominant issues in Mistry's novel, is not something new to Bombay. This colonial "settlement" marks the texture of the city as a split space between the natives and the outsiders, the Portuguese and the British colonial towns, the Northern native section and the Southern European section, which in more recent times is reproduced by the split between the city "proper" and its shadow, the slums. At the time when the very idea of the "proper name" of the city, and the discussion about what is proper to the city and what is improper, undesirable and alien to it, have been intensified (which eventually led to the politically fraught decision of renaming the city after its so-called native designation – Mumbai), it is very important to dwell on this issue of the split in order to examine the relationship between the "self" of the city, and its unlocatable, unmappable, and "untouchable" doppelganger that includes the slums, the nomadic, and almost deterritorialized pavement dwellers, the underworld, and the flux of "immigrants" to the city.

*A Fine Balance* is not, strictly speaking, about Bombay, for the novel never by name refers to the city it is set in. Mistry's oblique reference to Bombay as the "city by the sea" shows that he wanted to emphasize precisely that aspect of the city, represented by the gap in the quilt, which remains completely unreadable and unnamable. Even though there are a number of indicators that the novel is about Bombay— for instance, the references to the slums, the underworld, riots, beggars, the Maharashtra Rent Act, and the infamous city beautification project launched during the State of Emergency declared in the mid 1970s by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi— yet, Mistry never makes this connection explicit. Thus, by setting the story in a nameless city, Mistry intervenes in the burgeoning narratives about Bombay that center around the easy binary of the city proper and its other, the slums. On the one hand, Mistry, in the epigraph from Balzac, explicitly states that "this tragedy is not a fiction. All is true;" on the other hand, by leaving the locale of the narrative nameless he seems to suggest that there remains something completely elusive and fleeting in any narrative about the city that carries in itself a principle of



incompletion. “looking for that indefinable something we may be allowed to call modernity” (Baudelaire 99).

Unlike Baudelaire’s urban idlers for whom endless and aimless roaming and ceaseless gazing constitute the dominant passion of modernity (Baudelaire 99), Mistry’s characters are caught in a vortex of movement, which also unfolds like a spectacle essential to all gazing. Yet their wandering, Ishvar and Om’s “nomadic” existence together with Maneck’s restlessness and Dina’s displacement, is essentially different from Benjamin’s concept of the flaneur and collectivity, which he defines as the “eternally unquiet, eternally agitated being” (*Arcades* 423).<sup>6</sup> Talking about his childhood days in the village, while picking pebbles from rice for the dinner for the “collectivity” of four after they decide to sail under one flag in Dina’s flat, Ishvar reminisces how he used to do picking for his mother, but in reverse. He would go to the field after harvest and search for grain left from threshing and winnowing. “‘In those days,’ continued Ishvar, ‘it seemed to me that that was all one could expect in life. A harsh road strewn with sharp stones and if you were lucky, a little grain’” (*A Fine* 394). When asked how his childhood wandering and mapping of the fields changed into a different sort of mapping, he replies: “‘Later I discovered there were different types of roads. And different way of walking on each’” (*A Fine* 395). When complimented by Dina for aptly describing the situation, Ishvar remarks: “‘Must be my tailor training. Tailors are practiced in examining patterns, reading the outlines’” (*A Fine* 395).

It is these outlines and patterns we see in the steps Ishvar took in all the roads he walked. And the same cognitive mapping takes place in the bodies mutilated to fit the dramaturgy of begging in Beggarmaster’s notebook in which we see the inscrutable inscriptions of sub-alternative mapping that at once bear witness to the totalizing map of purity and calculative reasoning, and also register the unrecognizable resistance against all totalizing maps.

In the novel everyone seems to bear the city’s inscription on his or her body: the lawyer’s deteriorating voice, the beggars’ maimed bodies by their “master” to make them look more pitiable, and the amputation and castration of the tailors. Dina has her share of the inscription after her tyrannical brother, who wants her to look more homely and desirable to the suitors he invites to dinner, makes her wear back the locks she clips in revolt. Unlike Jameson’s city of “post-modern hyperspace,” which succeeds “in transcending the capacities of the individual human body to

locate itself" Mistry's characters, such as Shankar, the beggar on a roller at the corner of the Vishram, are constantly made into highly locatable legends and landmarks of the city (*Postmodernism* 44). Instead of repelling the other, as in Jameson's "Bonaventure" whose glass skin repels the city outside, and like the wearer of the dark sun glasses whom the interlocutor cannot look in the eyes, assumes and achieves "a certain aggressivity toward and power over the Other" (*Postmodernism* 42), Mistry's city exercises aggression on the other, not in order to push him or her out, but to absorb difference and otherness into the calculative and homogeneous map of its landscape. While Jameson's postmodernist hyperspace reveals a mutation of space "unaccompanied as yet by any equivalent mutation in the subject" ("Cognitive" 38), Mistry reads mutation of space through the mutilated body of the subject.

An example of mapping the mutation of space through the mutilation of the body is Beggarmaster's discovery that the heavily mutilated beggar, Shankar, is in fact his step brother. The truth about their relationship transpires when Shankar's mother, Nosey (who served as a beggar under Beggarmaster's father because her nose was cut off by Nosey's father as punishment to her mother for giving birth to a female and not a male child as he wanted), divulges the secret of her trysts with Beggarmaster's father in her youth. This discovery touches on his intimate relationship to a beggar he has been exploiting for years; it makes Beggarmaster realize his own true nature. For Beggarmaster it is "the trace of destiny" which draws the map of his family tree according to which he is related to Nosey and to Shankar whom his father sent for "professional modification," i. e. mutilation to prepare him for begging (*A Fine* 447, 451). This trace of destiny inspires Beggarmaster to draw his masterpiece of the dramaturgy of begging in which he draws both Nosey and Shankar, and himself as a disfigured spider:

A man with a briefcase chained to his wrist was standing on four spidery legs. His four feet were splayed towards the four points the compass, as though in a permanent dispute about which was the right direction. His two hands each had ten fingers, useless bananas sprouting from the palms. And on his face were two noses. . . (*A Fine* 452).

In the webs and tentacles of Beggarmaster's freakish self-portrait the mutilated figures of both Shankar and Nosey seem to pass on to Beggarmaster, as Nancy would say, in order to at once interrupt any idea of a relationship between the three figures, and to vindictively rupture the cruel and totalizing grip of Beggarmaster's exploitation. Though absurd,

this family tree or web constructs the fragile community or cognitive map of the disfigured.

Another moment of such a map or collectivity emerges at the end of the novel, when Om, Ishvar and Thakur, who some years ago burnt alive Om and Ishvar's family, cross one another's path. Despite Ishvar's protestation, Om strode boldly towards Thakur, now a minister overseeing the family planning camps across the nation; and before his uncle could pull him by his shirt and stop him from colliding with Thakur, Om spat at the minister. The arc of spittle, red with chewing spices, however, ended several feet short. Thakur stopped and said very softly: "I know who you are" (*A Fine* 13). Like Beggarmaster's aggressive eyes that could find his defaulter anywhere in the world, the minister's knowledge of Om, his mapping and measuring of Om's class, caste, and his being itself, are also complete and absolute. The minister's recognition of his erstwhile enemy exceeds the framework of "the gaze" or "interpellation," as it belongs neither to the structure of the objectifying look nor to the structure of hailing someone as a subject. His mapping is a form of legibility that changes space into a camp and that's where Om ends very shortly in the novel, when Thakur orders the police to round up the locals for forced sterilization and instructs the doctors to castrate Om.

In contrast to Thakur's totalizing map of the camp, Om's measured steps towards Thakur are unmappable and beyond the existing structures of signification and recognizable or "mappable" agency. Not that Om failed in whatever he intended to do [i.e. if he knew what he intended to do] when he saw Thakur. We still lack the instrument to map Om's footsteps; and we do not yet possess an adequate and appropriate theoretical language to work out the significance of his footsteps. Not even when we hear Michel de Certeau's reassurance: "History begins at ground level, with footsteps" (129). The footsteps that took Om to his doom leave behind traces of his unrecognizable agency of "pedestrian utterances" (and not simple resistances) in the city yet to be cognitively mapped.

### **The Inoperative Community**

Can unmappable pedestrian utterances make a community? As we know the novel is placed between two events of death on the railway tracks – first the discovery of the body of an unknown victim, perhaps of police brutality during the emergency rule, and the other, Maneck's body, when he jumps into the railway tracks and gets crushed by an oncoming express

train. His suicide brings the story to a full circle as if to suggest that the city that appears between these two deaths is a well rounded whole. Thus the trains not merely connect places and people; their motility also contributes to the mutilation of the bodies, to marking inscriptions on people's bodies, or worse, to their death. But at the same time it is a different marking and inscription that Maneck had in mind when he jumped off the platform and on to the gleaming silver tracks. His pedestrian utterance that disturbs the horizon of the totalizing map of the city not only connects him to his friends, the untouchables, whom he saw begging on the road dragging whatever remained of their bodies after all the mutilation they underwent, but also to his long lost friend Avinash, the student union leader killed by the police during the Emergency. While jumping to his death, "Maneck's last thought was that he still had Avinash's chessmen" (*A Fine* 601). Maneck's suicide is not just an attempt at inscribing what remains unreadable as agency in the official history or the totalizing map of a polity, but it is also an attempt at constructing a subalternative collectivity or inoperative community in and beyond death.

The glimpses of the inoperative community can also be seen in the untouchables' recounting of their adventures at the Vishrams, where the tailors could stitch together their version of the *Mahabharata*. The rebuilding of the impossible community and collective continues in Dina's flat. The impossibility of having a place or home that haunts the novel, which it frequently compares with independence, is not simply a question of scarcity of housing. What the dismantling of a settlement or personal space created even in a hopelessly public space such as street implies is the destruction of a collectivity. Thus when Thakur burns Om's "untouchable" family in the village, he was exterminating a collectivity that could have been a threat to his political career. During the Emergency when the police destroys the slums and clears the streets to make the city beautiful, it is again a collectivity of the street that is being destroyed. When the homeless and persecuted tailors meet the equally haunted Dina and Maneck – one hounded by a tyrannical brother at home, the other chased by the memory of his friends who were killed at the university hostel by the police during the Emergency's crackdown on student unions – they, out of necessity, form a collectivity in the form of an unusual family made of the outcasts. In one of her unsuccessful attempts to save the flat from the goons of the landlord, Dina evokes this collective to pull the wool over the rent collector's eyes. When Ibrahim, the rent collector, confronts her about hiring the tailors to run a business in residential

premises, which in itself could have been ground enough to evict her, she calls it rubbish. ““This man,” she said pointing to Ishvar, “he is my husband. The two boys are my sons. And the dresses are all mine. Part of my new 1975 wardrobe”” (*A Fine* 406). But even the sacredness of the “familial” place cannot save this collective from the landlord because all the laws that protect collectivities including the students’ and workers’ unions are abrogated by the Emergency rule, thereby making way for Beggarmaster to stage his dramaturgy of “looking after human lives” (360).

While the space of the city is being changed into a stage for dramaturgy, the mutation, unlike Jameson’s subject lagging temporally and conceptually behind the spatial mutation around him or her, is accompanied by the subject precisely because “looking after human lives” is the business of the drama. In the shadow of this drama which determines what Kevin Lynch, following Stern, would call “apparency” [or the creation of images, legibility and visibility of the city, in short the imageability of the city], emerges a form of life, which, unable to form a collectivity or maintain indivisibility, is perpetually exposed to division, dissection, and destruction (Lynch 10). Not that the subject is incapable of cognitively mapping the city, of experiencing the city as an image, but that his or her attempts at mapping the city are overwhelmed by the “apparency” or the apparitions of the regulatory eyes that hound him or her precisely because unlike Beggarmaster’s cognitive or dramatic mapping of completion and totality, the subject can only map the city as a radical incompleteness. We cannot, as Dina clarifies in the novel, mistake her for the infinity of the quilt-maker God that produces the whole and complete quilt, nor can we expect from the outcasts complete epic of *Mahabharata*. The incomplete and fragile collectivity of Mistry’s protagonists constitutes a community which is not operative or complete because unlike the totalities – social, economic or politico-legal – conceived or constructed during the Emergency, and unlike the messianic resistance prescribed by Benjamin for what he calls the real state of Emergency or revolution, the community of the four main characters, Dina, Iswar, Om and Maneck, is only a community of touching and sharing, or in short being exposed to the other. Their cognitive mapping only results, unlike the totalizing narratives of the city that seek to change or to retain a particular name, in a nameless city. To give a name is not just to impose a closure or structure on the city, but also to make the city contemporaneous to oneself, to one’s name and temporality as if it were the possession of one individual, one ethnic group or religion. Mistry leaves not only the city unnamed, but by tracing the

several pedestrian utterances of his nomadic characters, he creates a web of relations and resistances that cannot be recognized by any totalizing map of a purist polity.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Benjamin wrote the essay, "On the Concept of History" (from which the above epigraph is taken) between February and May of the year 1940, shortly before he attempted to escape the Vichy France and Nazism. His concept of the oppressed therefore specifically refers to the victims of the Nazi atrocities before and during the World War II. Yet Benjamin also makes this specific context speak to the general course of progressive history and time, which he labels as the homogeneous and empty time of the ruler or the victor, which, for him, exemplifies the state of emergency.

<sup>2</sup> Pollution of the untouchable may have a Hindu origin, yet untouchables are equally considered abject by people who practice other religions in South Asia. One of the literary examples of this curious fact is Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*, which discusses the place and perception of an untouchable in a Christian community.

<sup>3</sup> Black Revolutionary Workers was a league formed in the 1960s by autoworkers in Detroit who wanted to conquer power in the workplace. It achieved some success, especially through its use of media and information technology. However its base dispersed when the members decided to expand and generalize their revolution to other urban centers globally. The result is a wonderful book and film on the league, of course, at the cost of the movement itself.

<sup>4</sup> In some of the writings, the distinction surpasses all spatial, architectural, economic and political implications of the divide to take on such a metaphysical proportion that it becomes the fundamental line that distinguishes what is human from what is not. Desmond Morris locates in this ontological divide the prime example of "the city as the human zoo." In the preface of his study of urban living, *The Human Zoo*, Morris argues that his first face to face encounter with his notion of city as the human zoo took place nowhere else than in the slums of Bombay, where human territories are condensed to a degree "that makes even old fashioned zoo cages seem spacious" (ix).

<sup>5</sup> See Jha's *Structure of Urban Poverty*, page xi.

<sup>6</sup> And there is Baudelaire's notorious dislike of the working class that further distinguishes his flaneurs from Mistry's "nomads." Talking about George Sand's love for the working class, Baudelaire observes that it is a sign of "degradation of the men of this century that several have been capable of falling in love with this latrine" (quoted in Stallybrass & White 136).

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