

The Rat as Actant: Tracing Nonhuman Agency in Ashoka Mitran's *The Rat*

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Abstract

This study examines Ashoka Mitran's short story "The Rat" through Actor-Network Theory (ANT), illustrating how the agency of nonhuman actors disrupts the assumed stability of human-acted domestic territory. In the narrative, the rat transcends its existence as a mere pest and functions as an actant that disrupts the social, spatial, and psychological balance of the home. Through an examination of the interactions among human characters, objects (such as furniture, traps, and walls), and the rat, this reading discloses a dynamic and fluid network in which agency is distributed among human and nonhuman actors. The article contends that Mitran effectively deconstructs the anthropocentric gaze, demanding a rethinking of the means through which ordinary objects and animals influence human experiences. Through the prism of ANT, the rat becomes a central element in a complex assemblage, tasking human actors to rethink their spatial configurations, strategic moves, and relations of power. This reading extends the reach of literary exchange on agency and materiality in postcolonial urban space.

Keywords: Actor-Network Theory, Nonhuman Agency, Ashoka Mitran, Interspecies Relations, Domestic Space, Postcolonial Literature, Materiality, Assemblage, Object-Oriented Analysis, Indian Short Story.

Introduction

Actor-Network Theory (ANT) emerged in the late 1970s. It is a framework created by thinkers like Bruno Latour and Michel Callon to examine scientific activity without separating social and technical aspects from the start. A key idea is that action is shared among many contributors, or 'actants', which can be either human or nonhuman. ANT argues that actants are networks in themselves, emphasizing diversity and acknowledging anything that impacts a situation. Important terms include "black boxed," which describes how complex networks seem simple until interruptions show their detailed workings. Another essential idea is "translation," where one actor speaks for others that it brings into a specific course of action. ANT has greatly impacted areas like organizational communication by presenting new views on agency and how organizations are formed.

Ashokamitran was the pen name of Jagadisa Thyagarajan, an influential Indian writer in post-independent Tamil literature. He was born in Secunderabad in 1931 and moved to Chennai in 1952. There, he worked at Gemini Studios, an experience that inspired his book *My Years with Boss*. In 1966, he became a full-time writer and adopted his pseudonym, having left the film industry due to its inherent inequalities. His rich career produced over

two hundred short stories, nine novels, and many novellas and essays. Ashokamitran joined the International Writing Program at the University of Iowa in 1973. His works have been widely translated into English and other Indian languages, boosting his recognition. He received several awards, including the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1996 for *Appavin Snegidhar*, a collection of short stories. He passed away on 23 March 2017, at 85 years old.

“The Rat” and Actor-Network Theory

In Ashokamitran's "The Rat," Actor-Network Theory (ANT) provides a strong framework to examine how agency is shared between humans and nonhumans. It shows how outcomes are consistently negotiated within a complex network.

The rat is a central actant, not merely a passive nuisance, but an active force whose actions—gnawing clothes, spilling oil from the jar, creating disruptive sounds—profoundly impact Ganesan's domestic life and drive the narrative. These actions demonstrate the significant nonhuman agency of the rat. Other crucial nonhuman actants include the vadai (bait), the rat trap, the oil jar, and various household items; all "make a difference" by shaping events and influencing Ganesan's frustrated responses.

Ganesan's repeated efforts illustrate how action is overtaken (or other-taken). His escalating anger, sleeplessness, and attempts to capture the rat are not solely self-generated; they are "distributed, suggested, influenced" by the rat's persistent activities and cunning. His attempts to control the situation are continuously reconfigured and thwarted by the rat's intelligence and the unexpected behaviours of the nonhuman elements, demonstrating that action is never exclusively the product of a single, coherent actor.

The rat trap initially functions as a black box—a seemingly simple, predictable solution intended to resolve the rat problem efficiently. However, its repeated failures to perform as expected effectively reopen this black box, exposing its dependence on factors like the specific bait or the rat's intelligence. This process reveals the "generative intricacies" of its interactions within the network.

Ganesan attempts to translate the chaotic problem of the rat into a manageable solution by procuring the trap and various baits. He acts as a "spokesperson" for his desire to eliminate the rat, enrolling the trap and vadai into his program of action. Yet, the rat itself functions as a mediator, transforming and distorting Ganesan's desired outcome. The vadai, intended as an intermediary leading to capture, becomes a mediator as the rat consumes it without activating the trap. This constant "transformation, translation, distortion" of interests by various actants ultimately leads to the "futility" of Ganesan's endeavours, underscoring how his efforts are ceaselessly modified rather than simply transported. The story, therefore, effectively portrays the complex, constantly forming "collective" of Ganesan's household and his ongoing struggle through its intricate network of associations.

Interplay of Human and Non-Human Elements

Oligopticon, Ganesan's small, two-room house, particularly the kitchen and areas affected by the rat, operates as an oligopticon. This is a "local site" where Ganesan attempts to establish a "global structure" of domestic order against the rat's disruption. He sees "much too little" of the rat's larger life or strategies, but what he *does* see—the gnawed clothes,

spilled oil, and eaten bait—he sees "well" enough to respond. This highlights the "fragility and cost of connections" involved in his continuous, localised efforts to exert control.

Panorama, the panorama in the story can be understood as Ganesan's presumed, perhaps societal, expectation of a stable, rat-free, and harmonious domestic life. This "totalizing narrative" of a peaceful home, often produced from "blind rooms", is constantly challenged and "obscured" by the chaotic reality of the rat's persistent presence and the futility of his efforts. This desired "big picture" of control remains elusive, underscoring how such overarching views can simplify a fundamentally complex and actively assembled "collective".

Plug-ins, Ganesan's various attempts to combat the rat involve acquiring different "plug-ins". The rat trap itself is a technological "patch of competence" he "downloads" from the market. Similarly, the diverse baits he tries—vadai, boiled onion, chillie bajis, uppumaa—are "discrete, downloadable 'pellets' of competence" obtained through his wife's suggestions or from vendors. These illustrate how Ganesan's "subjectivity" and capacity to act are not innate but are "continually assembled and extended" through these external tools and pieces of knowledge, even if they prove insufficient.

Plasma, the plasma in "The Rat" represents the vast, unformatted, and largely unknown "outside" that exists beyond Ganesan's immediate control and comprehension. This includes the unpredictable, "missing masses" of the rat's true cunning ("fox's face first thing this morning"), its motivations, and its inexplicable ability to consistently evade capture despite Ganesan's best efforts. This "boundless reservoir of unarticulated or uncollected potential" highlights the inherent incompleteness of Ganesan's domestic "network" and the ever-present, destabilising uncertainties within his social world.

Discussions and Conclusion

Reading Ashokamitran's "The Rat" through Actor-Network Theory (ANT) provides a fresh perspective on Indian literature. It shows how all elements, including nonhuman ones like the rat and the trap, play important roles alongside Ganesan in shaping the story. This challenges the idea that only humans drive action. The concept of the rat trap as a "black box" reveals its complexities when it fails, while the house as an "oligopticon" highlights the limits of Ganesan's control. His use of baits as "plug-ins" expands his influence, while the rat's unpredictability represents "plasma"—the elements that are beyond control. The challenges, ANT's "slowciology" involves careful tracing, which contrasts with traditional literary analysis that focuses on themes or psychology. It also rejects "social explanations" and places importance on nonhuman agency, which further pushes against anthropocentric views. Thus, ANT considers literary texts as "laboratories" where social aspects are actively created, encouraging interdisciplinary discussions, such as those involving science and technology studies. It highlights "material-semiotic relationality," where meaning and materiality shape each other.

Works Cited

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