Religion 034

Partitions:
Religion, Politics, Gender in South Asia
Through the Novel

Balzac and Social Realism in Parsi Bombay:
From Partition to Emergency

Rohinton Mistry, *A Fine Balance*

Study Questions

**Introduction.** I began the reading course version of this class with some thoughts that first arose as I finished Rohinton Mistry’s *A Fine Balance* and began (again) *Midnight’s Children* by Salman Rushdie. Thoughts that arose as it began to snow, very lightly. This year, I return to these notes in the middle of a deep white snow storm and a crying wind around the edges of my office windows, echoing with the absence of a two-hundred-year old black oak, murdered last summer to make way for a new sustainable academic building, the BEP, “in harmony with nature.” Loss, and a white resonant emptiness.

While Rushdie has always reminded me of Gabriel García Márquez, particularly *in his Cien Años del Sol*idad, or perhaps the Carlos Fuentes of *Terra Nostra*, even the matter-of-fact “natural-surrealism” of Dickens, Mistry reminds me not of Tolstoy, but above all of Balzac -- as the wonderful colophon from *Le Père Goriot* says, this novel of “great misfortunes” is not merely an author's arbitrary “flight of fancy,” but “all is true.” A novel of social manners and a large canvas of characters -- vividly but objectively, almost indifferently, displayed -- and local vivid social-historical detail in the royal third person.

But this said, the Mistry is also about stories, about “fictions,” whole cloth or patches, fragments, life narratives cut here, truncated there, then sewn willy-nilly, many lives whose (necessarily) fragmentary narratives begin to take clearer shape and pattern when sewn into others’ lives, others’ pieces, to make a larger whole, even though it may ultimately be used as a cushion for the wooden platform on casters to ferry a legless sick beggar through the crowded streets of a great city by the sea. . . (pp. 480-481)

A brilliant and sad book, but a book that seeks social truth, and in this way it resembles the great novels of the 19th-century, Balzac, Zola, Tolstoy particularly.

We will read the book for its social, religious, and political themes -- comparing/contrasting its themes with those core themes of the Partition novels -- but note as you read the following imagistic/thematic and character arcs.

1) **The theme of “return.”** As in *Midnight’s Children*, with the story of Aadam Aziz, the grandfather of our hero, who returned from Germany, having the eyes of someone
who has “returned,” I think of Maneck, who will eventually look around him -- who will look at the India around him -- after having returned.

This is a theme in Singh with Iqbal, in Anita Desai in *Clear Light of Morning* with Mr. Biswas (Germany as well), and Aadam, who bangs his nose on the soil of Kashmir in the act of praying. . . What is this theme of return, and what does it have to say about the politics of the novel, of the India of Emergency, of the author's own point of view as a writer in English who emigrated to Canada?

2) **The quilt.** Dina's “quilt,” and all *weaving/ sewing imagery*. Time/memory into quilt patches (pp. 480-481). Also *making dresses*. The main metaphor in *Proust* for the narrator’s novel is actually a dress and the art of the dressmaker. What do you make of the quilt and tailoring images throughout the novel? **Parts and patterns, and the growing quilt.** What is the fate of this very important object in the novel. We have human lives here subject to change, growth obviously, but also change as loss, sometimes calamitous loss. The vision sometimes seems almost Buddhist. The quilt however, seems to grow. What do you make of this persistent image throughout the novel in the unfolding of the plot, a line, a trajectory? Shankar’s new vest, pp. 396-98).

*Wedding gift/time/their lives together; fragments, pieces, but here brought together; not torn, sewn.*

3) **Hair.** What of hair, from Dina Shroff's shorn black locks, to the collection of Rajaram the slum-dweller and hair-collector, the beggars with long lovely hair, and the hair-divination of Valmik the lawyer . . . **What of hair in the novel?** *Violation, physical beauty, commodity, threat, coercion, renunciation.* . . Look for hair . . . Hair hungry homicide (p. 435); Rajaram as *saṃnyāsī*; the birth of a sadhu (p. 468; 475). Attaching plaits to Shankar’s head (485-486).

4) **Children. Vulnerability of children.** Beggarmasters and their children. Mutilation and entrepreneurship. This has been a common theme in the course, at the center of the Partition novels, and we will end the course with, in our reading of Roy's *The God of Small Things*. **Children as beggars, as circus performers, as objects, pawns, things, property, etc.** Children and the Monkey-Man; children and the Beggarmaster. Shankar the baby and “professional modifications” (p. 447).

5) “**Slum**” as anti-structure, communitas and liminality. The character of the “slum,” the “ghetto,” like the magicians’ ghetto in Rushdie, as counter-community, magical transformative liminal space (Turner); carnivalesque and “festive” spaces (Bakhtin) that threaten political and social status quo and normative sovereign power of the State. Spaces at the margins (with its marginal communities, including children, women, transgender persons) that must be destroyed. Compare/contrast with various “religious spaces,” such as the *Gurdhwa* in Singh, *Ayah’s lap or Queen’s Park* in Sidhwa; the Delhi magicians’ “slum” in Rushdie; Jannat or the Paradise Sufi dargah/graveyard in Roy’s *Ministry of Utmost Happiness*. 


2
Core theme of Partition novels/also Indira’s Emergency: New Communities in Time of Trauma.


Beggars on street as weird/uncanny counter-culture at Shankar’s funeral (p. 493); “freakshow circus, the Beggarmaster and the drawing “freaks” (pp. 451-452). The funeral of cripples and beggars.

6) Character trajectories: of course Dina Shroff. Dina Aunty, sister, wife, friend, boss. Dina: a human touch, wonder and sorrow (p. 546). Dina and Rustom, their married life; rain, the bicycle, the violin, and the umbrella. Dina and Nusswan Parsi worlds. The village as character in the stories of Narayan and Ishvar, chamar boy turned tailors; Dukhi and Rupa; Uncle Ishvar and Omprakash (from chamar to tailor, caste/class leaping); Ashraf Chacha the Muslim tailor and his wife Mumtaz; Pandit Lalluram, the “Shit-Eating Brahmin;” (the Brahmin in the park in Sidhwa’s Cracking India, in the “shadow” of the low-caste, purity/pollution, bodies, touched and untouchable); Thakur Dharamsi, his complex violent role; Narayan's defiance; Shankar the legless handless beggar man; The Beggarmaster; the rent collector Ibrahim. Round characters, in spite of their horrors; their horrific inhuman actions. The novel and ethics. Rajaram as Bal Baba (pp. 592-593); fakologicst and Valmik. Final transformations in time of trauma.

Maneck’s father and mother, the fate of his Himalayan town after Partition and Independence, Kohlah’s Cola and the Parsi cantonment world in the foothills of the Himalayas. Fathers and sons in the Partition novels, in Rushdie.

Om “spat;” (p. 512), and sterilization Nussbandhi Mela (p. 514). Real contempt, caste, and consequences.

6) Author as character. Valmik. Fiction and autobiography. The political novel and personal narrative. For a vivid sense of the voice of our author Mistry, see the vivid arc- - the speeches and dialogues -- of the lawyer turned proofreader turned Sloganmaster turned lawyer turned mail-order hair-diviner, Vasantrao Valmik. His precious pens, and the fragrance of his ink. His stories. Lord of the Last Bench, p. 551.

Like the Valmiki of the Ramayana, he is a kind of first-poet narrator, a narrator/commentator who is also a character. A brilliant creation, this Yeatsian poet/commentator. His long speeches are key to the patterns of the novel, almost the voice of its author as commentator, gives a language to suffering and aspiration.

Chart his appearances. What kind of trajectory can you trace for him? Is he our poet-philosopher? Can he somehow make sense of our journey in this novel?
Dina saying prayers at the end (p. 563). Quilt and prayers. Patchwork transformed her silence into words; weaving, prayer, lament (p. 564).


I hope these notes help you as you make your way through this most remarkable book, savage and at times tender, but “all true.”

Then we will share our experience, our stories as readers, because, as Valmik himself says near the end of the book, “to share the story redeems everything. . . (594).” And perhaps we will feel it in our heart. . .

We spoke of the power of stories for politics, beyond theory. This book will give us more to think about.