

reader of postmodernist historiographic metafiction when coming across historical characters in works of fiction. Arguably, the depth of the reflection on the relationship between history and fiction is greater in the fiction analysed in *Telling Histories*, but this is fiction that still takes

itself too seriously to be genuinely subversive, genuinely threatening for the credibility of the historian's work. In fact, it is its best complement.

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Rohinton MISTRY. *A Fine Balance*. London: Faber & Faber, 1995.
614 pages.*

It sometimes seems apt to imagine the history of the Indian subcontinent as a palimpsest of literary forms. First a substantial layer of myth and epic, then a burning layer of tragedy, then melodrama and farce and so forth. Lately, the furious discovery of political scandals witnessed in India might suggest that it is now an action thriller, Hindi-film style,¹ which is currently being written out in subcontinental space. Rohinton Mistry's new novel, *A Fine Balance*, takes us back to the time that many observers of Indian history would unhesitatingly identify as that critical moment when the composition of this villainous tale of corruption in high places began. The declaration of the Emergency² exactly twenty years before the publication of Mistry's fictional account was a blunder of such mammoth proportions that there's little doubt that it will continue to stimulate the imagination of writers for a long while to come.

Having said that, however, one wonders whether there is any correlation between the fact that the blurb of Mistry's book tells us that he has «lived in Canada since 1975» and the fact that his recall of events stops precisely at that traumatic point in the inception of our symbolic political thriller.

The task of writers, it has often been said, is to keep memory alive. Were not the holocaust, or colonial repression or the slave trade fictionally redescribed in the public mind from time to time, a numbing amnesia would descend. Nations could be condemned in perpetuity to repeat those terrors of history that they had, willy-nilly, forgotten. To this extent, Mistry, like Rushdie before him, performs commendably in reminding the world of the horrors of the *nus-bandi*.³ operations, the mowing down of *jhuggis*.⁴ and those repeated fascist lies that were the stamp of the Emergency.

* A longer version of this review was first published as «Bombay's Balzac» in *Biblio*, March 1996. Reprinted with permission.

1. The Hindi film, with its characteristic song and dance routines and stereotypical plots, is now being recognised by critics as a distinct cinematic genre. Spawned by the Bombay film industry, which is the largest in the world and humorously known as 'Bollywood', the Hindi film embodies many aspects of the popular culture of contemporary India.
2. A state of Emergency was declared in 1975 by the then Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi, after she had been indicted for election malpractices by the Allahabad High Court. Almost all opposition leaders were jailed and nationwide censorship imposed. Despite these draconian measures, however, when a general election was held in 1977, Indira Gandhi was decisively voted out. The Emergency years: 1975-1977.
3. *nusbandi* (Hindi): vasectomy.
4. *jhuggis* (Hindi): small hutments in urban slums.

Yet, for Indian readers of Mistry's novel the situation is complicated by the fact that they, alas, do not need much reminding. There are still the lies, the idiocy, the wanton destruction, the mega-corruption. The Indian present is marked by its continuity with exactly that narrative of the Emergency; the same tawdry action thriller that revs up on the eve of every election, every few years. Farce and tragedy and certain epic capacities of endurance on the part of the Indian populace still underlie all political discourse. There's an excellently chosen epigraph from Balzac – about which I shall have more to say later – that heads *A Fine Balance*. It declares «this tragedy is not a fiction. All is true». To which the average Indian reader might want to add – «All is familiar, too – depressingly». So the question really is, what insights, what surprises, can the six-hundred odd pages of Mistry's novel offer those of his readers for whom the bad odour of the Emergency has never quite been eliminated since?

Now here I have to record that, despite the reservations expressed above, I in fact found myself deeply moved by Mistry's essentially simple story by the time I came to the unhurried end of it. Which means, not to put too fine a point on it, that Mistry's skills as a novelist, his style, was in the end what made his novel, for me, worth reading. Mistry covers Rushdiesque ground, but no writer could be stylistically more different. Like Rushdie, Mistry's favourite city appears to be Bombay, the «city by the sea» where the novel's action is set. As in Rushdie's works, 'thought police' of various revolting kinds called Facilitators, Motivators and so on march up and down the by-lanes of Mistry's novel stuffing 'beggars' into the backs of trucks, unloading them at work-camps and generally putting the whims of the political panjandrum who rule India into practice. Even the length of his novel

mimics Rushdie's voluminous masterpieces.

One finds hard, then, to suppress the thought, altogether unworthy perhaps, that Mistry has written this novel as a sort of anti-*Midnight's Children*, an anti-magic-realist rewriting of substantially the same theme. It's a safe bet, though, that few would find Mistry's portrayal of political realities as provocative as Rushdie's or want to sue him for libel, even though his critique is, at points, just as harsh and just as open – and the reason for this surely has to do in large part with Mistry's amazingly quietist style.

In order to approach this crucial matter of Mistry's style – paradoxically so subdued that it could well escape being classified as a style at all – I will attend now to two classic concerns of literary theory. These are, first, the question of tradition and, second, the question of location. Rushdie, as we know, has exuberantly claimed his descent from a «polyglot family tree» that includes writers as diverse as Melville and Machado de Assis; and while he does not mention Paul Valéry, Rushdie might not object too strenuously to seeing himself as part of that self-reflexive French tradition of writerly jouissance in which, as Valéry once declared, every page of literature boldly announces «I am a page of literature». Mistry, however places himself within another French tradition. His guru, as we may surmise from the epigraph to *A Fine Balance* is the great realist novelist, Balzac; and Balzac's declaration on every page of his novels might have been «I am a slice of life».

Telling it as it is or «striking true», as Balzac puts it elsewhere, simply requires the writer to stand back and let the story tell itself without too much 'artful' interference. Life is quite startling enough as it is. Which brings us to the question of location. Where precisely does Mistry stand as he resuscitates the Indian Emergency for his readers? One of the great

strengths of his current novel is that it sticks faithfully to characters and settings—a Parsee ambience and the city of Bombay—that Mistry clearly knows well and remembers even better. Firozsha Baag,⁵ is still, so to speak, a literary apartment block to which Mistry holds the keys. At the same time, Mistry lives in Canada, a country which is in fact analytically interesting terrain for a realist writer to occupy. For, despite its inner linguistic and cultural tensions, Canada is, as most Canadians themselves remark, a curiously low-profile country, off the beaten literary tracks of the Anglo-American world. Here, then, is a neutral observation post, an ideal non-aligned country of the mind for the realist writer who can here stand back and achieve that exact perspective—a fine balance.

Four characters are observed long and lovingly in this novel. They are Dina Dalal, a Parsee woman of spirit, widowed and still beautiful at forty-two; the pair of tailors, uncle and nephew, Ishvar Darji and Omprakash who do piece-work tailoring for Dina, always struggling to supply Mrs. Gupta, the tough 'import-export' business woman, with multiple dresses cut to an exact pattern, on an exact date; and Maneck Kohlah, the son of a school-friend who boards with Dina in her tiny, poorly maintained flat. The novel takes us confidently back to Dina's childhood, the early death of both her parents, and her subsequent upbringing by her hateful but well-meaning brother Nusswan. As soon as she can, inevitably, Dina breaks away, meeting and marrying her husband Rustom on her own.

Dina's three years with Rustom in his ill-equipped flat are the happiest in

her life—and the one purely luminous episode in the novel. After Rustom is tragically killed in a smash-and-run accident, it's sadness all the way. Always independent of spirit, Dina discovers in the long run that she cannot live with her brother's family, and after some false starts finally settles down to her 'profession' of middleman between Ishvar Darji and Omprakash and Mrs Gupta. And Maneck, the friend's good-natured son, learning refrigeration engineering in a Bombay college, is companion to all of them, until brutality by brutality, the Emergency smashes up even this precariously built, inoffensive web of relationships. Ishvar and Omprakash gradually slip into beggary from their proud calling as skilled tailors, the one with a blackened, damaged leg and the other unnaturally bloated as result of nusbandi gone wrong.

Towards the end of the novel, eight years on from the Emergency, Maneck returns to Bombay, from where he has been working in Middle East «refrigerating the desert». He finds Dina, beautiful Dina, grown old and grey, but still sharing her flat with the unrecognisable Ishvar and Omprakash. It is an unbearable shock. Even more shocking for the reader, hoping against hope that at least one of these characters will be spared, is that, finally, Maneck, the single figure left undisfigured in the novel, is killed too—in a senseless train 'accident' of the sort only too familiar on the subcontinent. Or is it suicide? The ambiguous phrasing in Mistry's novel seems to indicate the despair of self-annihilation: «When the first compartment had entered the station, he stepped off the platform and onto the

5. *Tales from Firozsha Bagh* was Mistry's first collection of short stories. In this volume, published in 1987, he describes the lives of those typical Parsee characters who populate his later novels. 'Firozsha Bagh' is the name invented by Mistry for the fictional apartment building in Bombay where his characters interact and reveal Parsee culture at its idiosyncratic best. 'Parsee', incidentally, is the local word for Persian, i.e. Zoroastrian.

gleaming silver tracks... Maneck's last thought was that he still had Avinash's chessmen.»

It's a bleak vision, almost Greek in its vision of the carnage human beings can wreak. As in Greek tragedy, though, the message, I think, is emancipatory, although the chessgame itself might be lost by most of Mistry's players. Maneck, young and unblemished must be «sacrificed», yet the fragile companionship of Dina and the tailors somehow survive. They are the novel's battered symbols of hope. Told in this sketchy fashion, the story of Dina and her rag-tag heroes may not amount to much, but the fact is that Mistry tells his story at such a stubbornly unhurried pace and with so much sympathy for his central four that you do end up caring. With these four, Mistry «strikes true». I imagine Balzac would have approved.

Naturally, a novel of this size has lots of other peripheral figures, most of whom, apart from Dina's family and her friend Zenobia, belong to the 'teeming' slums and pavements of the big, and definitely bad, city. Here Mistry is less engaging. Rajaram the Hair-seller, the Beggar-master, Vasantrao Valmiki, and the Monkeyman seem to have strayed over into Mistry's book from the alleyways of Rushdie's novels. Mistry, however, seems to lack Rushdie's wonderful zest for the bizarre. The portraits of grotesques in *A Fine Balance* are quite crudely drawn and touristy, and it is not apparent that Mistry expends on them the same affection or writes of them with the same knowledge as he is able to draw on for his main quartet.

However, the odd thing is that Mistry's scenes even at their most arresting or farcical or sadly erotic never really jolt us, so ordinary is their telling. His telling continually verges almost on the banal, reassuring us that the narrative voice throughout is basically naive, childlike – and thus genuine. Sancta simplicitas!

Reading this long novel, not a gasp or a guffaw once escaped me. I simply went along with Mistry's thoroughly unpretentious prose. True, once in a while my patience was a little strained, but on balance, I'd rate his laconic narrative quite an achievement. Again, Balzac scores.

This is a novel, ultimately, about the complex ecology of exploitation. All the Dinas and the Ishvars and Manecks and Beggarmasters and Zenobias and Mrs. Guptas form a complex chain of survival in which mutual need and mutual suspicion exist intertwined. Both extreme meanness and astonishing generosity are typical of this eco-system inhabited by most Indians of the middle-classes and the really poor. But when the boot is put in, as it was during the Emergency, by political forces at the top, the whole delicate balance is destroyed and utter disaster results. Farce and tragedy and myth, the underlying narrative layers of the subcontinent, take over once more from the action thriller. Read this book, though, not for its simple ethic but for its age-old storyline. For *A Fine Balance*, by virtue of some of the qualities I've just discussed, certainly qualifies Mistry as one of the foremost realist writers in English to have emerged (no pun intended) in recent years out of the subcontinent.

Speaking of balances, the theme of that «fine balance between hope and despair» runs, predictably, not just through the metaphors and episodes of the novel but extends to the heft and design of this elegant Faber volume. In spite of its formidable bulk, *A Fine Balance* is a joy to hold and behold. The archival cover photograph of an Indian juggling act by Dario Mitidieri, especially, serves as an inspired accompaniment to one of those repeated vignettes or set pieces that I suggested earlier serve to structure the book's otherwise possibly tedious length.

«The children were lifted high above the ground. Their faces disappeared into

the night beyond the reach of the kitchen lights. The audience gasped. He raised the pole higher... Then another little toss and the pole was balanced on his thumb..."

Readers of *A Fine Balance* may not quite gasp, as does the Monkey-man's audience, at the dexterity of Mistry's performance in this novel, but they will, I

feel sure, find this book a genuine addition to that palimpsest of literary figurations, mentioned at the beginning of this review, which describe for us the quite extraordinary dimensions of the Indian subcontinent.

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Shashi DESHPANDE. *The Intrusion and Other Stories*.
Delhi: Penguin India, 1993. 157 pages.

Among contemporary Indian women writers in English, Shashi Deshpande stands out as a major name. Although initially she began writing short stories, she also has to her credit four children's books and six novels. In this collection, she shows once more that the short story is a genre whose technique she masters. The nineteen stories are incisively sketched in a direct and unpretentious style. Her English is simple and natural, devoid of any artifice. The use of the first person narrator gives a ring of authenticity to the situations and brings the protagonist closer to the reader. The stories are for the most part woman-centered, women in their different roles of daughter, mother and wife, who find themselves enclosed in a tradition-bound male-oriented society and who inevitably suffer from loneliness and a sense of guilt and failure. Shashi Deshpande does not define herself as a feminist writer, and she has no intention of becoming the spokeswoman of the predicament of the middle-class Indian woman. Her novels and short-stories portray social reality the way it is, without any explicit critical claim on the way it ought to be.

Only three of the stories have a mythical background, with characters taken from the great Hindu epic, the *Mahabharata*. The other sixteen portray common everyday situations a Hindu woman has to deal with in a society that

strictly predefines her roles. All the female characters share a deep feeling of isolation and frustration. However, none of them will put in danger the stability of family unity.

Being an obedient daughter, a devoted wife and a caring and loving mother are the three ideals of womanhood in Hindu society. Shashi Deshpande confronts the reader with a set of situations in which living up to this ideal is far more important than women's personal rights. Becoming a devoted wife means submitting to the wishes of a husband who is, very often, a total stranger for the young bride and who will take her regardless of her fears and emotions («The intrusion»). The wife's duty is to fulfil her husband's expectations, allowing herself to be modelled by him, even if it is at the cost of losing her own self and personality («The stone woman»). A woman who has a successful professional career must be willing to give it up in favour of her husband's and this sacrifice is taken as a matter-of-fact («A wall is safer»). In such a context, the decision to get on at work implies doubts, remorse and a deep sense of guilt («It was the nightingale»). A Hindu wife may even sacrifice her sexual life if her husband's ideals require it («The first lady»). Marriage is presented as a trap, from which a Hindu woman cannot liberate herself without causing the whole system to col-