

Poetry, PROSE, and Political Science

By Rina Verma Williams

I've never read poetry in a political science class before.

I have frequently cited this statement as my favorite student evaluation comment ever. I don't even remember clearly if the statement was meant positively (I think it was!)—but I certainly took it that way. I have long used selected prose and poetry in introductory (first- and second-year) college-level political science classes focused on India or South Asia to convey certain themes and arguments to students. Using literature to study political science, politics, and history works well to draw students both with and without background knowledge of South Asia into a deeper level of engagement and interest in the region by taking them beyond textbook-style readings.

The field of political science itself has an uneven relationship to regional and area studies. As a result, students who have taken political science courses may come in with differing expectations about what will be covered in a given class, and what types of texts they've read or activities they've done in other political science courses—hence the effect of surprise in the evaluation comment above. But transgressing disciplinary norms and boundaries works to draw students into conversations about the region, giving them more ways to forge a connection with and develop interest in the region. Indeed, teaching cross-listed courses that draw students from women's and gender studies, and Asian studies—as well as some from engineering, business, and the physical sciences—almost obligates me to go beyond standard textbook-style versions of introductory politics and regional/area studies readings.

Because my students come from a range of majors and experiences, many have little or no background knowledge of the subcontinent, its history, or its politics. There are always a few heritage learners, whose range of knowledge varies as widely as that of the nonheritage learners. The readings and discussion questions I detail in this essay are likely to work well across a range of types and levels of courses and students. These texts could easily be used in AP high school courses in comparative politics, global or international politics, or world history courses that cover the modern era. Indeed, exposing these students at pre-college levels to accessible readings like these, which enhance but take them beyond textbook-style readings, may well prime them to come to college seeking even more knowledge of the region.

For many students, politics can seem like a very faraway, higher-level force that is not always close or relevant to their daily lives—and this is even true of American politics for American students! In such a context, it becomes even more difficult to imagine how students could forge a connection to the politics of a place that seems as remote as South Asia. A key goal in my classes is to bridge this gap for students, and using prose and poetry is a central way to do so. For a place like South Asia that can already seem distant and remote, relying solely on textbook-style readings can make it seem even more distant. An additional, critically important advantage of this approach is that much of the best literature and poetry of the subcontinent is in English. So the students are reading actual, original primary sources, thus again contributing to a sense of closeness/relevance rather than distance/irrelevance.¹

In this essay, I focus on the texts and authors that I have used most extensively in my courses over time. These include poems as well as fictional/autobiographical writings by the Bangladeshi author Taslima Nasreen (Nasrin, b. 1962) and short literary pieces by Salman Rushdie (b. 1947). These readings have withstood the test of time, across years and decades; even as I continue to incorporate newer readings, those I discuss here keep reappearing on my syllabi because they so concisely offer an entrée into enduring questions of politics on the subcontinent: questions about religion, national identity, gender, and the presence of history. I conclude the essay by briefly touching on a few other texts that I've seen utilized and used myself, though not as extensively as the ones by Nasreen and Rushdie. In the process, I will expand on the particular characteristics of readings that I've found work well in political science courses on South Asia.

"I Don't Believe in God": Taslima Nasreen's Poetry

I have used the poetry and prose of the controversial, multiply exiled Nasreen to facilitate discussion on the role of women in South Asia, as well as religion, the state, and censorship and politicization of art forms and texts. Works I have found particularly effective include a few of her selected poems² and the preface to her first novel, *Shame* (1997), which first earned her a *fatwa* against her life

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2019 portrait of Taslima Nasreen.
Source: Wikimedia Commons at <https://tinyurl.com/shorwvn>.

Nasreen's language is blunt and forceful; this opens a space to ask if students can see why people of faith might be offended by her writings.

and sent her into exile all over Europe, the US, and India (in 2008, she was exiled from India as well).³ The quotes that follow are drawn from these two texts.

Nasreen's writings touch on matters of persistent and ongoing import in South Asian politics. The poems speak directly to the relation between organized religion and religious fundamentalism or extremism, and the status of women in South Asian culture and society. They unambiguously convey her view that religion is a destructive force in society. The first line of "Self-Portrait" proclaims, "I don't believe in God." The "crafty politician" in this poem also comes in for derision for exploiting the forces of religious division for his—the gendered pronoun is clear and distinct in the poem—own gain.⁴ The poem "Temple, Mosque" conveys her unambiguous contempt for the forces of organized religion:

*Let the pavilions of religion be ground to bits . . .
For the welfare of humanity, now let prayer halls
be turned into hospitals, orphanages, schools, universities . . .
From now on let religion's other name be humanity.⁵*

Nasreen's language is blunt and forceful; this opens a space to ask if students can see why people of faith might be offended by her writings. But (I ask in turn) does that justify censoring the work? This leads to a discussion of censorship and politicization of art, and free speech protections around the world.

Nasreen's poems also convey her unambiguous view of the wretched status of women in South Asian society. "Bad Omen" starkly paints the portrait of a girl who is raped and then asks if her family will care for her and take her back.⁶ "The Wheel" sketches a portrait of women as commodities:

*They've dressed her in red . . .
Her ears have been pierced, along with her nose . . .
They've put bangles on her wrists . . .
A person is turned into merchandise like this . . .
She is sold,
sold openly.⁷*

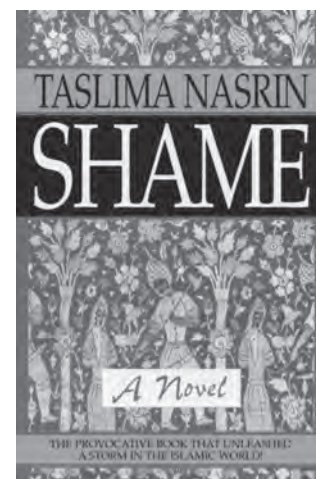
With these poems, it's productive to engage students in a discussion of Nasreen's own background and status—a medical doctor, highly educated, and a writer—which can diverge from the oppression of the women she is writing about. This leads into a discussion of women leaders (Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina) who have long dominated Bangladeshi politics, and women leaders of other South Asian countries: Indira Gandhi in India, Sirimavo Bandaranaike and Chandrika Kumaratunga in Sri Lanka, Benazir Bhutto in Pakistan. I thus prompt students to think about how two such starkly different realities—the depths of oppression and the heights of political power—can exist side by side for women in the region.

Bringing both sets of questions together, I ask students to consider whether organized religion can lead to women's empowerment. That is, can religion liberate women, or is it more oppressive of women? Can a secular feminism be successful in religious societies? Here I point out that Nasreen has critics from both sides. Religious conservatives obviously hate her, but some Bangladeshi feminists also oppose her: They argue she's done more to hurt the cause of women's rights in Bangladesh by being so harsh. And they contend she's never been involved in the women's rights movement in Bangladesh, questioning if she has ever really worked for or cared about women's rights.⁸

Finally, I ask students to consider the politicization of art, art forms, and artists, based on how Nasreen's publications have stirred controversy and earned her fatwas and exile from both Bangladesh and subsequently India. *Shame* tells a story of Muslim fundamentalist violence against a Hindu family in Bangladesh. The novel is her witness to the violence she herself saw in Bangladesh

Whatever I think is important to write, I do.

Taslina Nasreen. Source: Screen capture from the video *Taslina Nasrin: The Woman Who Destroyed a Mosque (Or Did She?)* on YouTube at <https://tinyurl.com/yyoufjcx>.





Salman Rushdie during an interview at the 2017 Frankfurt Book Fair in Germany. Source: Shutterstock. © Markus Wissmann.

Nonviolence was the strategy chosen for a particular people against a particular oppressor; to generalize from it is a suspect fact. —Salman Rushdie

in the aftermath of—and in retribution for—anti-Muslim riots in India in 1992. Her 1997 preface addresses these controversies and the banning of the book, directly and from her own perspective. She acknowledges that the book was criticized by literary and political journalists, and right- and left-wing critics in both India and in Bangladesh. Nonetheless, she claims,

“I do not think I should apologize to anybody for writing this book,” as it expresses “the agony of my heart” and vows that she “will not be silenced” in opposing “the disease of religious fundamentalism.”⁹ The preface does a remarkable job, perhaps unintentionally, of signaling the deeply complex, interconnected relationships among and across countries (India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh) and two religions (Hinduism and Islam), showing clearly how anything that happens to one community in one country reverberates across the region.

“Does India Exist?” Salman Rushdie’s Prose

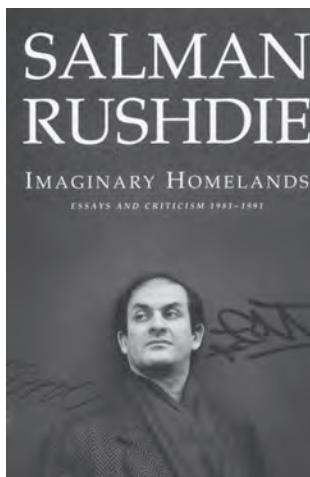
In courses (or sections of courses) focused more specifically on Indian politics, I have found three short essays from Salman Rushdie’s volume *Imaginary Homelands* (1991) particularly effective in sparking discussion of key issues. I assign “Riddle of Midnight” as an introductory reading for the very first class meeting. Rushdie’s question “Does India exist?” directly tackles the bases of Indian nationalism and national identity. A discussion of religious division as well as caste ensues, but what I like best about the piece is his optimistic ending: “India regularly confounds its critics by its resilience, its survival in spite of everything.”¹⁰ In just a few pages, thus, Rushdie deftly traverses the journey from skepticism to optimism that I hope students will take over the course of the class.¹¹

The second time students read Rushdie comes just a few weeks later, while we are ensconced in historical background and focused on the nationalist movement for Independence. Outside of class, I assign students the movie *Gandhi* (1982, directed by Richard Attenborough),¹² and they read Rushdie’s essay “Attenborough’s Gandhi” afterward. The movie, of course, is a moving account of many of the key highlights, lowlights, and personalities of the Independence movement, but is also flawed in important ways. Rushdie’s essay is a perfectly brief, direct, and unsparing (if often humorous) indictment of those flaws: Rushdie cites misportrayals of some leaders and the omission of others.¹³ He offers an incisive critique of the film’s underlying premise, worth quoting in full:

*The message of Gandhi is the best way to gain your freedom is to line up, unarmed, and march towards your oppressors and permit them to club you to the ground; [this is] dangerous nonsense. Nonviolence was the strategy chosen for a particular people against a particular oppressor; to generalize from it is a suspect fact.*¹⁴

From here we take up the discussion of whether the same tactics would have worked against, for example, the Nazis—a question Rushdie himself raises in the essay. He further notes that the movie underestimates the intelligence and overplays the saintliness of Indian political leaders in comparison with their British counterparts. Rushdie concludes that although Ben Kingsley’s acting was “luminous”—“at least *he* deserved his Oscar”—if “this is the Best Film of 1983, God help the film industry.”¹⁵ Students usually don’t have, and don’t actually need, sufficient historical knowledge to assess the accuracy of the claims either way. Instead, Rushdie’s essay lets them see where the shortcomings of the movie might lie, and it prompts a lively discussion about whether these flaws matter vis-à-vis the purpose of the movie: as a biopic of a political leader versus an accurate historical account of the events of the time.

About midway through the course, when we discuss the institutionalization and deinstitutionalization of Indian democracy, I assign “Dynasty.” This short piece skewers the Nehru–Gandhi lineage of the Congress Party. It focuses on Rajiv Gandhi’s 1984 election as prime minister. A political novice, he was elected in a sympathy wave after the assassination of his mother, Indira Gandhi (no relation to Mahatma Gandhi, I rush to point out to students), who was herself the daughter of Jawaharlal



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in a good way.¹⁶ The essay accessibly introduces the democracy vs. dynasty debate that dominated discussions of Indian politics for more than forty years after Independence: was India “really” a “genuine” democracy, or was it dynastic rule clothed in elections?¹⁷ In the current era, when no member of the Nehru–Gandhi family has been prime minister since 1989, the essay leads us to consider the decay of the Congress Party due to its heavy reliance on one political family for leadership. This gambit has failed repeatedly and spectacularly with the politically hapless Rahul Gandhi (Rajiv’s son, Indira’s grandson, and Nehru’s great-grandson). We discuss the corresponding meteoric rise of the right-wing Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (“Indian People’s Party,” BJP), elected to power in 2014 and re-elected in 2019, as well as the continued preeminence of the Nehru–Gandhi family in other ways: Sonia Gandhi, Rajiv’s widow, has long been the president of the Congress Party, and other family members continue to hold seats in Parliament, though some have joined opposition parties, including the BJP.

In addition to these readings by Nasreen and Rushdie, I have either used myself or seen other political scientists use other authors and readings to teach students about South Asian politics. These have included V. S. Naipaul’s *A Million Mutinies Now*, a nonfiction travelogue on what divides and what unites India as a country; Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* on the long historical reach of India’s Independence and Partition; and an essay by Arundhati Roy on the meaning of India’s 1998 nuclear tests.¹⁸ All these texts, including the ones I discuss in this essay, have worked well across a range of contexts, from the most prestigious public and private institutions to minority-serving institutions and those where significant numbers of students work full time and/or are first-generation college students. They introduce students to different perspectives on political issues and expand their conception of what is political. They also enable us to think broadly about the role of literature and writing in politics: Is literature apolitical, or can it or should it be? What is the writer’s responsibility for how, and by whom, their work is politicized?

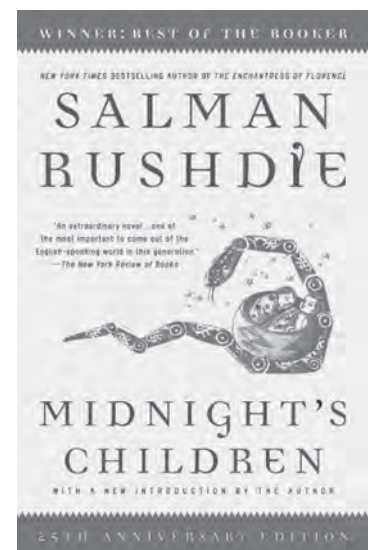
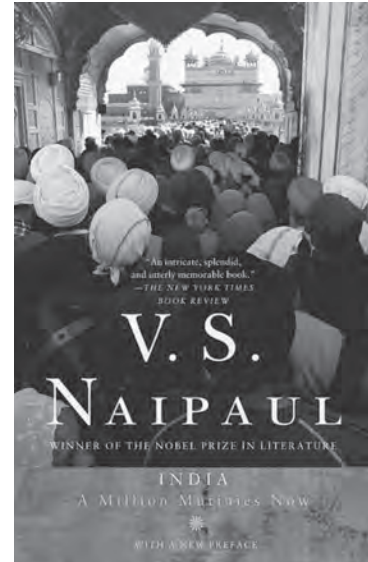
In this regard, it is notable that both Nasreen and Rushdie, whose writings I have used most extensively in my courses, are Muslim authors whose works have been banned and censored across the region, and who have themselves been exiled from their homelands in various ways and at various times. This enables students to draw connections between the actual work and the controversies it sparked, and how politics works in that space. Ultimately, we come to a discussion of the role of the state: How should the state respond to controversial work and to protests against it? Is it worse for secular, democratic regimes claiming to protect minority rights, as opposed to religion and religious extremists supporting authoritarian regimes (including military dictatorships), to ban literature? Does it matter if the community in question is a minority or the majority in the country?

Finally, it is important to note that my selection of prose and poetry readings for social science classes is not based on the same characteristics that a literature scholar might choose for a literature course; indeed, they may be just the reverse! Nasreen’s work, amongst all the political criticisms of it, has also notably been criticized for just not being very good writing. The same is not true of Rushdie, but a colleague who specializes in literature once offered the friendly suggestion that Rushdie’s readings I use in my courses are not his “best writing.” But this, I explained in response, was not the point of these readings in my courses. Rather, the best pieces for my purposes in a political science course speak directly to important political questions, and are brief, accessible, and to the point. This enables us to use them to dive directly into analyzing the political questions, and it encourages discussion from multiple perspectives. In this way, I have found tremendous benefit from bringing poetry and prose into the political science classroom in order to bring South Asian politics closer to the students. ■

NOTES

1. I note here that in South Asia (as perhaps in other parts of the world) poetry and prose at many points in history have been written precisely to express political agendas; thus, there is often an explicit and well-thought-out place of politics in poetry and prose in the subcontinent. In this sense, politics is “baked into” much South Asian literature, even at an ideological level. For example, the current Dalit (formerly known as “Untouchables”) literature and poetry movement tackles the oppression of caste and caste violence in India in an explicitly political movement focused on Dalit visibility and speech. I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for making this very salient point.

Nehru—a leader of the Independence movement and India’s first prime minister. Rushdie concludes that the family’s dominance of the Congress Party, and thus much of post-Independence Indian politics, “must go beyond politics and history and enter the zone of myth”—not



2. Taslima Nasreen, *The Game in Reverse: Poems by Taslima Nasrin*, trans. Carolyn Wright (New York: George Braziller, 1995).
3. A fatwa is a religious decision or nonbinding legal opinion given by a scholar of Islamic law; both Nasreen and Rushdie have faced fatwas calling for them to be killed. Ali (2008) provides an accessible overview of the political context, comparing Nasreen's exiles from Bangladesh and from India, focusing on the role of the state. A recent video of Nasreen is here: <https://tinyurl.com/yyoufjcx>.
4. Nasreen, *The Game in Reverse*, 21.
5. *Ibid.*, 46.
6. *Ibid.*, 47–48.
7. *Ibid.*, 12–13.
8. In women's and gender studies and feminist theory classes I have taught, this point also lets me raise a question about gatekeeping within the movement: who gets to decide who can claim the mantle of feminism and who can't?
9. Taslima Nasreen, *Shame: A Novel*, trans. Kankabati Datta (Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 1997), 7–14.
10. Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981–1991* (London: Viking, 1991).
11. As a recommended reading, I assign an interview with Rushdie on the political aspects of his writings. See Ashutosh Varney, "The Political Rushdie: An Interview," in Daniel Herwitz and Ashutosh Varshney, eds. *Midnight's Diaspora: Critical Encounters with Salman Rushdie* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008), 9–22. Rushdie himself has risen virtually to the status of pop culture icon, as evidenced by his appearance in an episode of Larry David's HBO series *Curb Your Enthusiasm* ("A Disturbance in the Kitchen," season 9, episode 3; first aired October 15, 2017).
12. I usually arrange an optional group showing of the three-hour film with samosas and other snacks, which is always enjoyable for students—and for me as well!
13. Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands*, 102–104.
14. *Ibid.*, 105.
15. *Ibid.*, 105–106.
16. *Ibid.*, 48.
17. This becomes, incidentally, a productive moment to bring up long and storied histories of families that have dominated US politics: it usually doesn't take long for students to bring up the Kennedys, Clintons, and Bushes on their own, and then readily admit that this doesn't make them consider the US any less "truly" democratic.
18. Indeed, I must credit my dissertation adviser, Ashutosh Varshney, who was the first political scientist I saw use literature and even music to teach students about Indian politics, in his introductory class that I served as a graduate teaching assistant for in the early 1990s. Pedagogical resources discussed in this paragraph: V. S. Naipaul, *India: A Million Mutinies Now* (New York: Penguin, 1992); Arundhati Roy, "Introduction," in Ian Buruma, ed. *India: A Mosaic* (NY: New York Review of Books, 2000); xvii–xxxiv, and Salman Rushdie, *Midnight's Children* (New York: Knopf, 1981).

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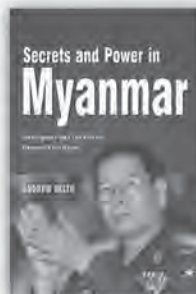
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