



TREATMENT OF REALITY & FANTASY SALMAN RUSHDIE'S *SHAME*

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ABSTRACT

Salman Rushdie's third novel Shame was published in 1983. Many critics saw this novel as an allegory of the political situation in Pakistan. Shame won France's Prix du Meilleur Livre Etranger (Best Foreign Book). It was a close runner-up for the Booker Prize. Both these works of postcolonial literature are characterised by a style of magic realism and the immigrant outlook of which Rushdie is very conscious, as a member of the Indian diaspora. This novel centered on a well-to-do Pakistani family, using the family history as a metaphor for the country. The story included two thinly veiled historical characters - Iskander Harappa, a playboy turned politician, modeled on the former Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, and General Raza Hyder, Iskander's associate and later his executioner. The publication in 1988 of his fourth novel, The Satanic Verses, leads to accusations of blasphemy against Islam and demonstrations by Islamist groups in India and Pakistan. The orthodox Iranian leadership issued a fatwa against Rushdie on 14 February 1989 - effectively a sentence of death - and he was forced into hiding under the protection of the British government and police.

INTRODUCTION

'Shame' is the consciousness or awareness of dishonour, disgrace, or condemnation. Genuine shame is associated with genuine dishonor, disgrace, or condemnation. False shame is associated with false condemnation as in the double-bind form of false shaming; "he brought what we did to him upon himself". Therapist John Bradshaw calls shame the "emotion that lets us know we are finite". [Bradshaw, 1996] The debunking of the mythic mode is continued by Rushdie in his third novel, *Shame* (1983). This mode blends history, myth, politics and fantasy in a novel at once serious and comic. Rushdie describes, "A sort of

modern fairy tale, the novel is set in a country that is not Pakistan, or not quite.” This explores such issues as the uses and abuses of power and the relationship between shame and violence. [May, Hal. 1984. 413]

Rushdie describes a ‘not-quite Pakistan’ thirty-seven years after its independence from colonial rule. While describing this, Rushdie sees it still caught up in the subject-object dialectic imposed on Third World people by a Manichean imperialism. To him, Pakistani people still view themselves as objects. This is because they have been unable to shake off the sense of shame and denigration heaped on them during colonial rule. This sense of shame results in its converse: shamelessness. Humiliate people long enough and a wildness bursts out of them. This cycle of shame leads to shamelessness. This shamelessness was set in motion. It is because of the humiliation experienced by the natives under colonial rule. In Rushdie’s opinion, this shamelessness exists to the present day. This vicious cycle reinforces our abjectness. Psychologists often use the term “toxic” shame to describe false. Psychologists recently introduced the notion of vicarious shame. ‘Shame’ refers to the experience of shame on behalf of another person. Individuals vary in their tendency to experience vicarious shame. This is related to neuroticism and to the tendency to experience personal shame. Extremely shame-prone people might even experience vicarious shame even to an increased degree.

‘Shame’ is considered one aspect of socialization in all societies. ‘Shame’ is enshrouded in legal precedent as a pillar of punishment and ostensible correction. ‘Shame’ has been linked to narcissism in the psychoanalytic literature. It is one of the most intense emotions. The individual experiencing shame may feel totally despicable, worthless and feel that there is no redemption. According to the anthropologist Ruth Benedict, cultures may be classified by their emphasis of using either ‘shame’ or guilt to regulate the social activities of their members.

In his novel *Shame*, Rushdie writes, “Is history to be considered the property of the participants solely?” In *Imaginary Homelands* (1991), a collection of essays on racism in Britain, Rushdie calls for ‘books that draw new and better maps of reality, and make new languages with which we can understand the world.’ Both of these quotes offer keys to an understanding of the author. Rushdie is renowned for taking symbols and figures from different myth systems and religions. He is also well-known for interweaving them with different juxtapositions. The themes from Islam and Hinduism are interwoven with figures from English literature and English literary references. His work advocates that the cultural exchange brought about by Empire has enriched rather than cheapened contemporary literature. In *Shame*, Rushdie makes use of the myth. He points out that the natives were never anything other than objects in their own esteem and never will be if they do not step outside the circle of shame. The novel spans three generations. It centers on the lives and families of two men - Raza Hyder, a celebrated general, and Iskander Harappa, a millionaire



playboy. Both of them are based on real-life characters. One of them is based on the real character Pakistani President Zia-ul-Haq.

Another character is based on the former Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. Their life-and-death struggle played out against the political backdrop of their country. This struggle also is based on recent Pakistani history. Bhutto was deposed by Zia in a military coup in 1977 and ultimately executed. In Rushdie's view, it was because the sense of objectness is so deeply embedded in the people of Pakistan. It has led to an extremely shameful political and social history for the country. He obviously views Bhutto's execution and the establishment of a military dictatorship with deep abhorrence. As a result, such a painful history can be discussed only through a fairy tale. This history can be discussed through mythic or romance mode. Rushdie says realism under such conditions "would break a writer's heart." [*Shame*, 70]

Rushdie begins his myth by describing the mythic hero, Omar Khayyam. Khayyam is as a "peripheral hero." He was one who was afflicted from his earliest days by a fear. It was that he was living at the edge of the world. He was so close that he might fall off at any moment. He experiences such a sense of marginality, of objectness. It was because he was conceived out of his mother's sense of abjectness. This was a sense shared by the family in their cloistered world, significantly situated right across from the Palladian Hotel. There the suited and booted imperial "angrez" (British) officers gathered nightly to dance. But from that, they, by virtue of being natives, were naturally excluded. So, after the death of their father, they invite the white officers to a gala celebration. Then they choose one of them to conceive a baby by Omar Khayyam, born out of three sisters.

Omar Khayyam is supreme avatar of shamelessness. He should end up getting married to Sufiya Zenobia, the incarnation of shame. This is then not only appropriate, but necessary. It is because it is just this combination of shame and shamelessness that will ultimately result in the violence. This violence will put an end to the shamefully objectified Third World societies. This violence will put an end to the repressive, male-dominated society of Pakistan. As Rushdie explains in book III of *Shame*, "Between shame and shamelessness lies the axis upon which we turn." After the destruction of a Third World obsessed with its shameful objectness, there will be created another world. This world does not have to be defined through Manichean subject-object dialectic. This is what Frantz Fanon hoped for also. Thus, once again, Rushdie has succeeded in using the mode of myth to destroy itself. His use of the mode of myth is in order to prove his point that ultimately we have to take responsibility for our history. We cannot hide this history behind any myths. It is because those too will destroy us in the end.

Shame begins and ends in a fantastic house in the town of Q., located on the arid, isolated border between Pakistan and Afghanistan. Nicknamed Nishapur, home of the

great Persian poet Omar Khayyam, it is inhabited by three sisters who for twelve years raise a son, named for the poet. They rear him in strict isolation from the world, instilling in his brilliant mind a strange feeling of being peripheral and inverted. In exchange for being allowed to attend school, Omar is ordered never to feel shame (*sharam* in Arabic). He goes away to medical school and a brilliant career as an immunologist and shame does indeed appear to have no part in his voyeuristic, misogynistic character.

Shame is told in the third-person by an author who frequently intrudes into the narrative. He explains how the novel would be different if it were a true story about Pakistan, laments his introducing a characters as vile as Omar Khayyam Shakil and as pitiable as Sufiya Zinobia Hyder Shakil to be its heroes, explains how he invented Sufiya Zinobia as a composite of three characters from the newspapers and vents on various political, social and religious topics. Thus, Rushdie, prize-winning novelist, forced into hiding in London after the furor caused by his *Satanic Verses*, is very nearly a character in the novel, in which he claims will be his last exploration of the Eastern mind.

Sufiya remains oblivious to the crimes that she has committed. Omar's marriage to Sufiya appears to be out of goodwill but is actually an assertion of control and power over her. Omar attempts to remove the evidence of Sufiya's shame in the same manner that he has removed it from his own life, by ignoring it, but shame triumphs over Omar in the end. He is decapitated, as are Sufiya's other victims. In the book's final moment all that is left of Omar is a, "giant, grey and headless man, a figure of dreams, a phantom with one armed lifted in gesture of farewell." [305] Storytelling is a prevalent theme in Rushdie's novels. It adds to the complex layers of his postmodern text. Rushdie illustrates the problem of storytelling through Sufiya's 'soon-to-be' mother Bilquis. When Bilquis first marries Raza Hyder, she lives with his extended family in "the old village way". The women all live together while their husbands are away working. In order for Bilquis' new extended family to accept her, her mother-in-law explains that, "you must know our things and tell us yours." [74]

By offering the story of her past, Bilquis hands it to them with the understanding that, "the telling of tales proved the family's ability to survive them, to remain in spite of everything, its grip on its honor and its unswerving moral code." [74] Her stories were altered, when necessary, to "maintain the grip on honor". They were changed to reflect what they *should* be (according to...?). This is a major concern of the Narrator, and accounts for the relentless self-reflexivity in his text. He ceaselessly offers alternate possibilities and insights into the "ways" that his characters defend their honor and remove the possibility of shame from their narrative. The narrator is exploring the true manifestation of the roots of the family.

The irony is that there is nothing sacred about the text. It was told in one way and then it was passed on through different hands over time. It was edited where the teller saw most fit. Through the exploration of the myth of roots "Truth" begins to emerge. Rushdie's Narrator

brings to the surface the other stories that are not always told. Ultimately, many critics disagree as to whether or not his postmodern project is successful. But the alternate stories offered by the narrator give readers insights which lead to a deeper understanding of this rich text. The stories in the text, for the sake of simplicity can be separated into two categories: the plot (the fairy story), and the subplot (the nagging voice of the self-reflexive narrator). As the story progresses, the struggle to gain an understanding of truth takes precedent over the plot and the subplot offers an escape from the traditional story. Throughout the text Rushdie asks his readers to explore the paradigms which shape their understanding of truth. Through the telling of the two incongruous stories, Rushdie is exploring what scholars such as Timothy Brennan refers to as “the myth of the nation”.

Joel Kittouri and Stephen Morton also discuss the concept of myth as a means of identity formation. Morton explains that Rushdie sees the production of postcolonial identity as being a “fictional composite” of traditional and modern views. Through the exploration of history as a societal construct, Rushdie probes for a deeper understanding of the dominant paradigms which have shaped his own perceptions. The incongruity of the stories presented, is emblematic of multiple power struggles. These struggles are evidenced through the subconscious drive of Rushdie’s narrator to present a truthful story, and simultaneously continue to tell the one with which he is the most comfortable. He cannot deviate from the “hallowed sacred text” yet he does, repeatedly. Ultimately these deviations have led to the questioning of Rushdie’s storytelling.

The struggle for truth is evidenced through the narrator’s obvious unreliability and through the lack of control that the narrator has over what stories will finally emerge. Rushdie’s post-modern fragmented fantasy world is not an excess of belongings. It allows readers to visualize the alternate states of reality present in the text—and the world surrounding them. Through fantasy, Rushdie is able to reject normative views of how history has progressed, and is progressing. Joan Scott discusses the retelling of history as fantasy and utilizes what she refers to as “Fantasy Echo” to support Foucault’s vision authorship. She says:

Fantasy is the means by which real relations of identity between past and present are discovered and/or forged. Fantasy is more or less synonymous with imagination and it is taken to be subject or rational, intentional control; one’s direct imagination purposively to achieve a coherent aim, that of writing oneself or one’s group into history, writing the history of individuals or groups. [Scott, Joan. 287] Scott believes that fantasy is not a subjection of them other but rather that it “enables individuals and groups to give themselves histories”. Scott and Aijaz offer differing opinions on the nature of storytelling and the author as being the ultimate subject. The position of the author as the subject is the crux of Rushdie’s necessity for exploration. The Narrator highlights this exploration telling a story about a country that is not “Pakistan, or not quite”. The narrator explains that:

There are two countries, real and fictional, occupying the same space. My story, my fictional country exists, like myself, at a slight angle to reality. I have found this off-centering to be necessary; but its value is, of course, open to debate. My view is that I am not writing only about Pakistan.” [22]

Rushdie frequently uses the narrator’s voice to defend his message. His defense is so convincing that it seems that Rushdie’s narrator could be speaking directly to the critics who question his methods of creation. He acknowledges the “off-centering” as necessity, because of the inevitability of the “missing bits”. So he chooses to tell many stories, and question each of them. Throughout *Shame* readers will be introduced to multiple stories, all of which are necessary to the whole. But their alternate states of existence are constantly questioned. In *Shame*, Rushdie has presented a fictional country that is based on Pakistan—but it is also Pakistan. Some authors use obscure metaphors in their fiction writing so that readers may participate in a journey of discovery. Many of Rushdie’s metaphors are far from obscure. He insists that readers reevaluate what they have already known to be true. This adds to the critical attacks surrounding his work and consequently, to the defensive tone of the narrators question in *Shame*, “Who commandeered the job of rewriting history?” [86]

The novel itself is a rewriting of history, and many critics struggle with whose history Rushdie is telling. Rushdie is writing as a “duel immigrant”. His narrator lives in London he and is telling the story of a “country that is not Pakistan—or not quite,” because he does not know if *he* has the right to tell the stories. His ambiguous authorship becomes problematic and many critics wonder what perspective he is writing from. Aparna Mahanta discusses this problem in ‘Allegories of the Indian Experience’. Mahanta states that:

Rushdie’s novels are not for the ordinary Indian. In the first place Indians don’t figure in these novels, except as that familiar sea of dark faces, the sea of humanity beating against the ubiquitous citadel’s of the white man’s presence. [1984: 244]

This highlights the problem of Rushdie’s inclusion in the canon of postcolonial literature as well as the problem of ambivalent authorship. The author’s questioning of all Truths rejects a cohesive national identity and establishes his work as “counter-canonical”. As a member of this counter-canon Rushdie is on the outside again. His status as the teller of stories is questioned because he is viewed as a member of the western world looking back at his homeland. The counter-canon does not exist only in the realm of literary criticism. Rushdie’s relentless questioning of Truth extends outward to the problems of the postcolonial nation and his responsibility as the subject and/or the subjected.

Shame’s ‘fairy story’ is the story of two families: the Hyders, and the Harappa’s. The heads of household are based on the Pakistani political leaders Zulfikar Ali Bhutto (Iskander Harappa) and his predecessor General Muhammad Zia-al-Haq (Raza Hyder). The turmoil

surrounding these two political leaders is also analogous to the critical conversation surrounding most of Rushdie's work. Bhutto represented the modern ideals of democracy and socialism. The General, who had Bhutto executed after overthrowing his leadership, advanced the Islamization of Pakistan and established a more centrally controlled government.

The two men represent the clash between intellectual modernism and the adherence to ideological convictions. Both men are equally destructive to their families and themselves. Iskander Harappa engages in debauchery and infidelity throughout the text while insisting on a new country and promoting science and "modern thought". Raza Hyder turns his back on anything that is not a part of the image of nationalism that he promotes. This clash is central to the Bhabba's assertion that, "Hybridity is heresy" and it brings to surface the complex issues surrounding identity formation. Salman Rushdie presents in this text a gloomy picture of most aspects that have become characteristic of Pakistan and that he obviously considers inhumane and therefore harmful to human nature and its integrity. Among them are corrupt regimes that use violence against their people as well as the role of fundamentalist belief in Pakistan's leaders and the significance of the army's power. The novel reflects Rushdie's rejection of the idea of this separate country Pakistan in the first place and exposes the consequences of inhumane rule, which prove to be extreme in their violence and destruction.

A particular emphasis on the role of women in the novel will be made, as they are the ones that suffer most under the various governments and who have to struggle hardest in order to survive. The character of Pakistan is, from the beginning, presented to be to a very great extent determined by politics. Every act, such as showing or watching a film at the cinema, becomes a political statement that carries many dangers. Mahmoud the Woman, grandfather of our protagonist Sufiya Zinobia, loses his cinema as a result of his openness towards both Western and Eastern influences. Showing films of both backgrounds on the same day, a fire breaks out after someone has planted a bomb.

The fire caused by the explosion of the bomb is also used as a symbol of the destruction of open-mindedness and tolerance in respect to culture and nationality. Tolerance is ironically called a 'fatal personality flaw' by the narrator who thus imitates the people's speech. The trigger that has led to this violent act was the display of a love scene that met on strong criticism by religious fanatics, as they are adverse to physical love. They hence disregard a crucial element of a person. Religious intolerance and division constitute the ideology Pakistan was founded on. One can therefore convincingly conclude that the country was doomed from the very beginning. A strong repercussion of intolerance in Pakistan was censorship that assails freedom of expression.

One of the most imaginative forms of self-expression, art, was almost entirely denigrated for example by the above-mentioned film censorship and the ban on books that contain words or

ideas that run counter to the rulers' beliefs. Pakistan does, in the next stages of nationhood, not become a more tolerant state at all, not even when first the reign of the mullahs and then that of the army ended and Bhutto, embodied in the character of Iskander Harappa, established a so-called democracy that promised elections and thus seemed to assume the image of freedom and liberation. The novel's narrator sharply questions Raza's regime and laws through a television interviewer who (allegedly) represents the opinions of many people in the west: His institution of Islamic punishments such as flogging and the cutting-off of hands is considered to be a barbaric act. Furthermore it is pointed out how Raza justifies his laws in the name of god and religion and how he thus uses religion as an excuse for any behaviour including violence. Hyder's (Zia's) regime has stripped people off their humanity and instead treated them as they would treat beasts. It has therefore violated human rights.

The narrator emphasises that it is not religion as such that should be blamed for all the injustices that occurred, as religion could even have become "an effective unifying force in post-Bangladesh Pakistan". It is fundamentalism, which has been imposed on the people by their rulers in the name of religion, which has brought on the violence and misery. Raza, as other dictators before him, inevitably falls from power as well and has to escape before he also encounters a violent death that is really just the logical conclusion of his own inner death as a human being. Omar's mothers use this viewpoint at the end of the novel to justify their killing of Raza Hyder: 'there is no shame in killing you now, because you are a dead man anyway. It is only the execution of a corpse.' Another danger to the people of 'Pakistan' is posed by a terrorist group from Afghanistan, which is named the Al-Iskander group. The latter strikingly resembles the actually-existing Al-Kaida group.

The narrator explores this theme by particularly concentrating on techniques of repression, neglect and exploitation. 'Repression is a seamless garment; a society which is authoritarian in its social and sexual codes, which crushes its women beneath the intolerable burdens of honour and propriety, breeds repressions of other kinds as well.' The first example of women's encounter with difficulties under the present system is that of our protagonist's, Omar Khayyam Shakil's, three mothers. They refuse to adopt the country's moral codes of shame and attempt to lead lives that are free from moral constrictions. Such resistance, however, only seems to be possible by their withdrawal into their house where they are secluded from the outside world. An exciting and adventurous life in the outside social sphere is replaced by the adventures they undertake in their imagination. Their active unconscious is alluded to by the image of the labyrinthine character of their mansion. Attention should be paid to the fact that these three women are presented in the form of a trinity. This can be read as an allusion to the Christian 'Holy Trinity', which can be substantiated by the fact that they were raised by Christian ayahs. Even though, they do not engage in the Christian ideology, the symbol points out that the sisters, rejecting Muslim fundamentalism, found a religion of their own, which is the belief in their strength through their union. Divine love is replaced by human love. In addition, the trinity of the three sisters can also be read as a critique of the

Partition: Their need to stay together here reflects the opinion of many anti-Partitionists who did not believe in the advantages of destroying India's unity.

In the end, even though the sisters show some resistance, this resistance cannot really be described as a success, as it ends in violence and destruction and has not achieved to take influence on politics, as resistance has just been enacted in their home. Farah Zoroaster, Omar's fellow student, deals with the country's ideology of shame also in a critical although a different manner. By having an affair with her teacher Eduardo Rodriguez and by getting pregnant as a result of it she is rejected by society and cruelly thrown out of her home by her father, who has completely internalised society's attitude towards shame and who has thus no space any more to house his daughter.

Rushdie uses the story of an imagined country—a thinly-veiled Pakistan—to show the instability of such constructions and hierarchies. Ultimately, this novel serves as a harsh warning of the bitter consequences for a nation which refuses to embrace the freedom and flexibility that come with hybridity. Ideas about what the nation are, what it ought to be, and who gets to decide is undergoing major revisions in the postcolonial age. As nations in Africa and Asia began emerging from under colonialism during the mid-twentieth century, many theorists and critics began to wonder if the Western Enlightenment idea of the nation-state was still relevant. According to Rushdie, Pakistan is the ultimate constructed nation. The two Wings (now Pakistan and Bangladesh) were separated by 994 miles of Indian Territory. Pakistan was “that fantastic bird of a place, two Wings without a body, sundered by the land-mass of its greatest foe, joined by nothing but God.” [186] The only thing that held the fragile nation together during the 24 years before the Bangladesh Liberation War was Islam and determination.

Rushdie states that the “famous moth-eaten partition of India only gave” Al-Lah a few insect-nibbled slices of it, some dusty western acres and jungly eastern swamps that the ungodly were happy to do without. (Al-Lah's new country: two chunks of land a thousand miles apart. A country so improbable that it could almost exist).” [57] Thus, Rushdie argues, religion was also used to try to hold the two very disparate parts of the nation together, giving them one identity.

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