



Representation of History in Salman Rushdie's *Shame*

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ABSTRACT

Salman Rushdie is one among the most acclaimed Indian writers in English. Rushdie is known for his complex themes and techniques. Rushdie's writings focus on 'double identity', 'fragmented vision of life', 'divided selves' and 'shadow figures' which are often backed up by history or historical events. Midnight's Children (1981), Shame (1983) and Shalimar the Clown (2005) are some of his novels that are based on history. Shame explores the history of Pakistan's Politics from a point of view, which disrupts the historical realism. Rushdie achieves this by intertwining time and memory in a way it represents the real as an eruption of fiction. Rushdie reconstructs the political history of Pakistan by clearly exposing the deep Socio-Economic and Political imbalances prevailed during the framing of this constitution in his novel Shame. Rushdie has also rejected the historical time and makes his characters to rely on the time recourse by memory, dream and fantasy. Rushdie delved deep into the hearts of the common people who are the victims of partition whose innermost senses of shame, shamelessness, hope, despair, ambition and anguish has been well exposed. Rushdie's Shame includes historical material along with metafictional self-reflexivity with the purpose of subverting the Eurocentric history writing. In short Rushdie questions the imposed nationalism. In Shame, the decentralizing of history is achieved by exposing the recent political history of Pakistan with the simultaneous narration of stories of the victims of past. In Rushdie's counter-narrative, the individual plays an active role whose voice is in conflict with the dominant leading to the monologue of history to face a multivocalized response.

Keywords: Corruption, History, Palimpsest, Politics, Tyranny.

Shame (1983) is Salman Rushdie's third novel. Being the immediate second to his acclaimed Midnight's Children (1981), Shame's core resembles the core of Midnight Children. When Midnight's Children deals with India and its historical events, Shame exposes the historical background of Pakistan. It reconstructs the political history of Pakistan by clearly exposing the deep Socio-Economic and Political imbalances prevailed during the framing of this constitution. The coups, murders, assassinations, rigged elections etc have been made to expose in a way that it demonstrates the grim atmosphere of fear, intrigue and humiliation which have been a part of life of the common mass of Pakistan. Shame also discusses heritage, authenticity, truth, shame and shamelessness and their impact on both the individual and the mass. Rushdie through all these questions the truth on implied nationalism, the constructed and imposed nature of meaning. Rushdie in his interview to Kumkum Sangari states,



Midnight's Children was a book that was deliberately constructed to be very open; *Shame* describes a very closed society... and so *Shame* is a closed system. [1]

Shame is a modern fiction set against a thinly disguised real background. The novel starts by introducing the Shakil family who lives in a fanciful mansion nicknamed Nishapur. The three sisters Chhunni, Munnee, and Bunny are more like prisoners than being the residents of the Zenana wing. They enjoyed each other's company and amused themselves. They felt a sense of relief than being worried at their sorry state in which their father has left them when he is dead. After their father's demise, the Shakil sisters conducted a feast inviting select people of the society including the British settlers. During which shamefully one of the sisters is impregnated by a westerner. But, they have managed to hide the terrible secret. No one knows who the real mother of Omar Khayyam is, not even Omar. Young Omar Khayyam Shakil grows up in a surrounded intimacy of his mothers but, he is restricted from the outside world till his twelfth age. When he becomes twelve, he requests his mothers to let him experience the world and get education. This has been granted and he pursues the same to become an immunologist.

One among the central characters is the simple-minded Sufiya meaning 'wisdom'. Her father Raza Hyder, a rapidly rising army officer, is ashamed because his firstborn child is a girl. Her mother, Bilquis sees Sufiya's simple-mindedness as a sign of her own shame, retribution for an extramarital affair. Sufiya, a congenital blusher, becomes a sponge who soaks up the shame of those around her and of those who feel no shame but should. Sufiya Zinobia is the purest and the most innocent character in the story. She not only blushes for the shamefulness of the world but also takes it all in her which results in drastic consequences. All those shame that overflows in her changes her into a beast briefly. Shame accumulates in the simple mind of the Beauty which transforms her into the Beast of violence temporarily.

The Beast first breaks through at her age of twelve. Out of her father's shameless action Sufiya bites off the heads and eviscerates 218 turkeys of Pinkie Aurangzeb (father's mistress). Episodes of violence are followed by a rebellion of her body's immune system leaving her mortally ill. Dr. Omar by then a famous immunologist and a notorious libertine; saves and falls in love with her. After some years, Sufiya and Shakil marry, but the marriage is not consummated. The struggle within her body continues resulting in the raping and beheading of four young men whose corpses lies stained with semen. Dr. Shakil realizes what is happening and approaches Sufiya's father, General Raza Hyder, who is now President. They agree to keep her sedated in an attic room, from which she eventually escapes. Sufiya's end comes when she seeks out Omar in his childhood home Nishapur and beheads him. Sufiya, the Beast of Shame, explodes into a fireball, destroying everything around her. That is the uninhabited shamelessness has inhabited the ignorant which has given her the break.

Sufiya's story does not hold center stage. The heart of the narrative is the complex relationship between the Hyder and Harrapa families. The suave, sophisticated future Prime Minister, Iskander Harrapa, is a cousin by marriage to the Muslim-fundamentalist future President Hyder. As able young men in a new country, both rise rapidly. Although they help each other's careers, there are strong antagonisms between them, ranging from



sexual rivalry to political and religious differences. Harrapa is the more successful and makes Hyder his commander-in-chief. Talvar Ulhaq, Hyder's son-in-law is appointed as the head of his political police. As time goes by Harrapa is overthrown by a military coup headed by General Hyder. Harrapa, succeeded by Hyder not in post but in power and authority, is hanged to death. President Hyder rules by strictly following the fundamentalist Muslim law. This strict following and practice of the same law eventually makes him a tyrant. Like all tyrants he has to run for his life saving it from his own people who he has taken to granted. All these happenings have made him to seek refuge in Omar's childhood home. But even there he is not safe. He is haunted and hunted by his own deeds of past. Omar's family kills Hyder along with his wife, in vengeance for the long-ago murder of Omar's brother, a member of a rebel tribal group. Scarcely less important than the rivals are their wives and daughters. The courtships and early married lives of Bilquis Hyder and Rani Harrapa are told in rich detail. Bilquis, the daughter of a Delhi film theatre manager, sees her father blown to bits before she becomes a refugee during the events surrounding the post-war partition of India and Pakistan. The trauma eventually leads her into madness. Rani, soon sent to the Harrapa family estate in virtual exile, weaves the ugly history of her husband's rise and reign into a series of eighteen shawls. Harrapa's daughter, Arjumand, who becomes her father's assistant and votary, sternly represses her femininity to act in a male-dominated society. However the characters framed by Salman Rushdie resemble the life events of people of Pakistan in both the political arena and common mass.

Salman Rushdie in his *Shame* not directly put up an exhibit of his ideas and facts which he wishes to convey. Unlike a historian and like a literarian he has searched and find means in exposing the facts through his writings. *Shame* doesn't portray much of the specific details truly but he makes his characters to resemble and live in the shoes of the historical personages. Uma Parameswaran opines, "*Shame* is a history, but it is only skeletally history" [2]. Rushdie's work is not chronological but it is a creative work. Rushdie thus rejects the historical time and makes his characters to rely on the time recourse by memory, dream and fantasy. He documents history by creating an illusion of fantasy and unreality. He asserts, "My story's palimpsest-country has, I repeat, no name of its own" [3]. The Partition of the subcontinent, its aftermath and the struggles faced by the third world countries, especially Pakistan, to make their stand constitutes the core of *Shame*. Rushdie delved deep into the hearts of the common people who are the victims of partition whose innermost senses of shame, shamelessness, hope, despair, ambition and anguish has been well exposed.

After creating Pakistan on 14th August 1947, attempts are made to erase the past history in order to rewrite it. This attempt of Pakistan to cut itself from its root to make itself an imposed history by fusing it with religious fanaticism is dealt by Rushdie in his *Shame*. *Shame* covers the history of Pakistan form 1947 to 1983. Rushdie critiques the history of Pakistan by taking select events in his hands. Rushdie uses the term 'Palimpsest' to reflect the attitude of Pakistan in covering up its past by re-writing official history. To prove this he contradicts the exposition of this country with the common happenings in it like violence, revenge, betrayal, death etc. The novel revolves around the families of the Shakils, the Harappas and the Hyders. It is by following the members of these families Rushdie projects the shameful activities practiced by the shameless Politicians of Pakistan.



There arises a coincidence with the lives led by the characters shaped by Rushdie and the prominent historical figures of Pakistan. When Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's life and Iskander Harappa's life resembles; Zia Ulhaq's life and Raza Hyder's life resembles each other. Not only them but several prominent characters of the novel and the prominent historical figures of Pakistan resemble each other. Some of them are Marshal A with General Ayub Khan, General Shaggy Dog with Yahya Khan, Sheikh Bismillah with Sheikh Muhjibur Rahman and Arjumand as Benazir Bhutto etc.

The characters in *Shame* though resemble with the life events of the political figures of Pakistan; they are shaped in a way to contradict with the resemblance. Rushdie achieves this through by fixing different traits while shaping them. The novel covers the events of Pakistan from the Partition to the East-West conflict which are common to the Third world nations. As Kumkum Sangari opines,

the history of the west and the history of the non- west are by now irrevocably different and irrevocably shared.

[4]

Shame deals with the events like the overthrowing of Ayub Khan from the Presidentship, the practice of martial law by General Yahya Khan, the rise of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, the dictatorship of General Zia etc. These have been showcased evasively from both the individual and the common point of view. The plot travels with the feelings of the mass over the tribulations exalted over the people by their own administrators. The Genocide in Bangladesh, followed by the Islamic revolution, the war etc has also been present. S.K. Tikko says,

Rushdie presents only a casual picture of the communal disturbances that were to be witnessed on the eve of the great divide when bombs had begun exploding in different places [5]

Rushdie switches into real events when *Shame* describes the political trouble that engulfed between Raza Hyder and Iskander Harappa. The conflicts between Hyder and Harappa are closely parallel to the political realm of disturbance between Ali Bhutto and Zia. Pakistani leader Zulfikar Ali Bhutto has assumed the leadership of the country and become Prime Minister of Pakistan. He along with his party leaders while assuming powers has promised hope, openness, brilliance, land reform and family unity being their prime base of governing Pakistan. In reality Bhutto and his politic comrades has taken advantages of their positions. Instead of taking measures to develop the nation, they have shown interest only in making personal benefits. He along with his comrades failed to do for what they have ascended the administration of the nation. Rushdie pictures this vividly in his *Shame* but in an indirect manner. Rushdie states ironically:

...fortunately, However, I am only telling a sort of modern fairy-tales, So that's all right, nobody needs to get upset, or take anything I say too seriously. No drastic action need to be taken either. What a relief! [6]

Later, General Mohammed Zia Ul-Haq the General of the Pakistan army has overthrown Bhutto from his authority and imprisoned him. As days gone Bhutto is hanged leading to the formulation of Military Coupe in



Pakistan. General Zia has taken the power of governing his country only to make people to see him resembling his predecessor. Thus, the emotion shame becomes a part of Pakistan politics as Rushdie expresses:

Shame is like everything else; live with it for long enough and it becomes a part of the furniture. In Defense, you can find shame in every house. [7]

Rushdie's *Shame* ignores the bright side and focuses only on the part of corruption, tyranny and oppression. Iskander Harappa is delighted that both his cousin and minister little Mir Harappa will be under his foot. Harappa abuses, slaps even spits on Hyder's cheeks, showing on humiliation and discomfiture exalted by the powerful even over their second-in-command. Rushdie by this makes the reader to think and visualize the exploitation exalted over the common mass as these qualities have the way of flowing from higher levels to lower levels. Harappa even lapses his masses and maltreats his ambassadors. Unfortunately, Harappa's corruption and iniquity lead to his destruction giving the opportunity to Hyder and make him powerful. Iskander's death matches the incident of Bhutto's murder. Moreover, Iskander's death is followed by Raza Hyder's succession likewise Bhutto is succeeded by Zia. He starts his career as a captain and steadily rules Pakistan. Raza tries to govern the masses under the name of religion to justify his political policies, for instance the cutting and the fobbing of hands. In Rushdie's view it is called violence and bloodshed in the name of religion, but that later makes Raza an ideal religious man and successful in his country.

During his regime, there has been legitimacy and the land has witnessed prosperity. The people become more and more religious and the mosques have been getting full. Raza's, way of governing to elevate people by religion proved a success at first. But Hyder's extremity in his stand has soon led him into violence and tyranny. Drinking, gambling and going to theatre are banned by Raza, paradoxically, he makes compulsory religious practices. Raza proclaims that on prophet's birthday each individual of the nation must pray at 9A.M or they will be imprisoned. Furthermore, women are forced to put veil and anyone dares to take it off will be spat upon by men. Raza kills people who are against religion trying to poise and control the country. Worst still, Babar, the second son of Chunnee, Munnee and Bunny, is killed by Raza for no valid reason. Besides, Sufiya Zinobia transforms completely into a monster. Raza, Bilquis and Omar escape to Burka. Raza hides his identity as the masses will kill him. The Shakil sisters make toxic food to feed Hyder to seek their vengeance, consequently Bilquis dies because of it and Raza tries to escape but he is killed by a dagger. Finally, Raza has confronted the punishment for his deeds. In the same way Zia has also been assassinated along with his wife in a helicopter bombing by his own army men.

Bilquis is also an important character when taken on par with the character's contribution towards history. Rushdie expresses his 'self' through this character. Life of Bilquis closely resembles the journey of Pakistan, its emergence as well as its convulsions. She has rejected her history in order to purify herself from the past believing which is the only way to begin a new life. She begins her life in India where she lives with her father Mahmoud who loses his monarch due to his philosophy of tolerance. Bilquis having no other means becomes a migrant and goes to Pakistan. However, she is still considered as a disease of fixity because her history is



suspicious. Thus, an immigrant means that the person cannot follow neither laws nor traditions and customs. The novel itself is a rewriting of history, but Rushdie's perspective in writing history is ambiguous. His identity is not clarified, because he has mentioned that he has not the authority to tell stories thus for him the origins of Pakistan is also dubious. Therefore, Rushdie tents himself as a foreign chronicler, as someone who writes back the past by observing from the outside. Thus, *Shame* can well be described as a historical metaphor that has shown the reality in an unconventional way by questioning the same.

The Present is built upon the bones and ruins of the past. Like a bedtime monster's influence on a kid, history maintains influence on the day to day lives of the people belonging to any superstructure. Identities have been shaped even before ones' entrance into the world as a result of an already super imposed superstructure. A child's entrance to the world means its immediate process of socialisation shaped by the events of the past of which it has no share to do but to bear the cross. Rushdie's *Shame* can be viewed as an allegory on the birth of Pakistan. From the beginning one can see parts of historical events on which the nation is built. The legacy of the British Raj is a particularly strong motif, for example. The idea of being 'born into shame' is also a consistent theme throughout the novel. This shame from birth could be said to mirror the greatest tragedy and its repercussions during the birth of Pakistan itself. As the displaced peoples moved between India and Pakistan in 1947 there was massive bloodshed on religious grounds. Over a million people died in the partition of Pakistan and India.

The history of Pakistan records a chain of betrayals, wars and coups. Pakistan's crisis of identity finds only this way of voicing through violence. Even the origin of Pakistan makes it impossible to get away from its two-way strife with the past. On one hand it seeks to obliterate its Indian past to assert its freedom and on the other hand doing the former would make it detach from its own roots. Its struggle to obliterate from the past leaves it with no roots, but it has to. Hence it is "peeling, fragmenting palimpsest at war with itself" [8]. Partition has made Pakistan to deal with another set of a problem. It has to face two sets of hostile people- the local and the immigrants from India. The immigrants are made to immigrate forcefully which implies they are not refugees but the nation's citizens, but they are not treated so. Leaving them in a massive social distress further depletes the economy. Added to all these serious issues the corrupted 'self' of officials and administrators spend their time in saving their heads than to work for the benefit and development of the nation. All these and many more maladies has resulted in the under development of Pakistan.

To Rushdie "History" is an objective term which does not exist. It is a concept that has been socially created by human to establish a superstructure. Ironically no two people's views on the same event will be exactly the same because of the problems of interpretation, memory and integrity. Hence to what extent every facts of history could be true remains idle. Rushdie's *Shame* includes historical material along with metafictional self-reflexivity with the purpose of subverting the Eurocentric history writing. In short Rushdie questions the imposed nationalism. In *Shame*, the decentralizing of history is achieved by exposing the recent political history of Pakistan with the simultaneous narration of stories of the victims of past. In Rushdie's counter-narrative, the individual plays an active role whose voice is in conflict with the dominant leading to the monologue of history



to face a multivocalized response. Rushdie thus attempts to combine the unreal with the real historical facts of Pakistan to uncover the palimpsest.

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