

SHAME AND SHAMELESSNESS IN SALMAN RUSHDIE'S *SHAME*

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Contemporary Indian writer Salman Rushdie's oeuvre is being celebrated by his witticism and his courage to touch upon themes such as history, politics and religion. *Shame* is his third novel published in 1983. Like most of his works, this book is also written in the style of magical realism. Like his previous novel *Midnight's Children*, *Shame* portrays the ethnic tension between Indians and Pakistanis.

Shame delineates the lives of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto through the character Iskander Harappa and General Muhammad Zia-ul- Haq through the character General RazaHyder and their relationship. Robert EMC Dowell writes:

Salman Rushdie has attempted in *Shame* to illuminate Pakistan's hideous political realities in an extravagant satire in which Raza acts out the role of the Pakistani General Zia-ul- Haq, while Iskander (Harappa) represents the deposed (and later executed) head of state, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. But one might fairly ask how many

readers will know enough of the inside details of these men's lives and of the grim events of the new nation of Pakistan to appreciate a satire on them. (328)

The central theme of the novel fictionalizes historical events adding many cultural elements to Rushdie's narrative. Violence is the main theme born out of shame. The concepts of shame and shamelessness are explored through the characters of Sufiya Zinobia and Omar Khayyam respectively. The novel portrays elements of family and marriage, politics and culture and colonial and postcolonial concepts.

Rushdie's *Shame* heralds the arrival of three dimensional fictions. It is a story of the rise and fall of three families in a city known as "Q." This city of "Q." could be identified on the earthy plane with Quetta. But Rushdie forbids this association. He says it "Q" with a capital letter. This city is actually a version of Pakistan by itself: "I have not given the country a name. And "Q" is not really Quetta at all" (29). The story begins with an unusual story that is the birth of Omar Khayyam Shakil and the circumstances around him. He is supposedly born to the three sisters Chuni, Munnee and Bunny in the big old house of their father after his death. Their only access to the world was through a dumb waiter. Everything around Omar was a fantastic mystery including his birth. As the three women simultaneously pretend to be pregnant at a house party. Thereby Omar is unsure of who is his father as well as his mother to be. After the birth of Omar, the mothers decide to grow him up without any sharam (or) shame. On his twelfth birthday he was focused to leave Nishapur. Nishapur is a high mansion in the city of "Q."

Omar was sent to the cantonment school and is persuaded by his tutor Eduardo Rodriguez to become a doctor. This migration of Omar is about the personal migration of Rushdie. Rushdie considered India, Pakistan and England to be his mothers and his migration from one country to

another and his experience of translation is bound with his conception of Pakistan as a second home. “ I, too know something of this immigrant business. I am an emigrant from one country (India) and a new comer in two (England, where I live, and Pakistan, to which my family moved against my will)” (85).

He reflects upon his expatriate status at length:

Although I have known Pakistan for a long time, I have never lived there for longer than six months at a stretch... I have learned Pakistan in slices... however I choose to write about over – there, I am forced to reflect that in fragments of broken mirrors... (69)

The plot shifts when Omar has landed on a second place, which presents the story of the rise and fall of the two men and their families like Iskander Harappa and RazaHyder. With these two characters Rushdie recreates the major strands of the contemporary history of Pakistan, and tells the story of a very small group of people who are responsible for the making of history and for the controlling of power and for whom politics is a kind of family quarrel.

SufiyaZinobia, daughter of Hyder, is the heroine of the novel and personification of shame. She was born when her father expected for a male baby. Her brain damaged with fever so that she was left a mentally disabled child. Physically, she is fit but mentally seemed to be nine years old girl at the age of twenty eight. She is the essence of *sharam* for the family.

The stillborn son died again, even his ghost snuffed out by the medico’s fatal speech: ‘No possibility of error. Please to note that the child has been washed. Prior to swaddling procedure- matter of sex is beyond dispute. Permit me to tender my

congratulations'. But what father would allow his son, twice conceived to be executed thus, without a fight? Raza tore away swaddling cloth; having penetrated to the baby within he jabbed at its nether zones; 'There I ask you, sir, what is that?'... '—A bump!' Raza shrieked hopelessly. (95)

Most of the central characters are based upon true political figures, but as the story progresses, it becomes clear that they are fictional such as Omar Shakil, SufiyaZinobia and their relationship with the self-reflexive narrator. The narrator himself is another character who emphasises his own marginal status and in aligning himself with the other characters in the novel. The narrator is Rushdie himself giving his personal feeling towards the society. In a passage contained of wonderful irony the narrator conflates himself, his 'hero' Omar Khayyam Shakil, and the translated popular, 'Oriental' figure of Omar Khayyam, who the narrator points out in the text, was never very popular in his native Persia but existed in the West "in a translation that really is a complete reworking of his verses" (29), very different both in spirit and content. "I have been borne across. It is generally believed that something is always lost in translated; I cling to the nation- and use in evidence the success of Fitzgerald- Khayyam – that something can also be gained" (29). The narrator muses of the distinct sensibility of the migrant writers saying that: "I have a theory that the resentment we *mohajirs* engender have something to do with our conquest of the force of gravity. We have performed the act of which all men anciently dream, the thing for which they envy the birds; that is say, we have flown" (85).

Shame, shamelessness and violence are the major themes in the novel. Sufiya and Omar play out the duality between shame and shamelessness as a coin which has two sides. Sufiya becomes literally the conscience of her parents as well as the world bereft of shame. She comes

to stand for the shame and violence of Pakistan. Her final act of shame is when she murders her husband Omar in his own mother's house. Sufiya's shame engulfs everyone she meets in her story. She was born "the wrong miracle" and seemed to go downhill from there" (69). She is personified as Pakistan and shame. The nation, as well, is described as "a miracle that went wrong" (86).

The character of Sufiya is partly built upon the incident of a British- Pakistani girl in the East end of London. This girl was killed by her own father in an act of honour because he suspected that she has physically united with a white boy. Sufiya is also presented as the shamelessness of the country. She damages her own hair at the onset, and moves on to decapitating Turkeys as well as men, and destroys property. Sufiya may be regarded as symbol of the Islamic nation in its utopian aspiration as the land of pure. In this case her character hints at forces of retribution as a retort to the loss of shame. Thus the dialectic of shame and shamelessness is symbolically entwined in her character. "Sharam, that's the world. For which this paltry 'shame' is a wholly inadequate translation... what's the opposite of shame? What's left when sharam is subtracted? That's obvious: shamelessness" (38-39).

Omar Khayyam Shakil the hero of the novel represents shame within himself from his birth. He is charged by his mothers not to feel the "forbidden emotion of shame" (33) before his first raid into the world beyond their home. Yet, he taught the idea of shame when he leaves "Q." Along with shame Omar had a disturbed state of mind because of his brother's death by to his friend Iskanda Harappa. According to Omar's mother shame makes "your heart starts shivering," it makes women "went to cry and die," and men to "go wild." It is "a necklace of shoes" (34). On the other hand Omar is often characterized like the Western, dominant bad influence,

shameless and without any sense of guilt about his wrong doing. For example as a young man Omar takes advantage of women by using Mesmer's techniques, which he learns by reading the international collection of books in his grandfather's extensive library (27-28). He does not have any shame because of his mothers and their act of committing murder in their own home at the end of the novel. Their motive for murder is revenge for the murder of their second son, Babar, by RazaHyder. He has commanded his troop members to send eighteen bullets into the body of Babar Shakil the young brother of Omar.

Rushdie brings out his opening about the shame that is presented in this world by asking questions. Where does the shame go when people in power appear uncaring about their own actions? "Imagine shame," he says,

As a liquid, let's say a sweet fizzy tooth-rotting drink, stored in a vending machine. Push the right button and a cup plops down under a pissing stream of the fluid. ... [but] what happens to all that unfelt shame? What of the unquaffed cups of pop? Think again of the vending machine. The button is pushed; but then in comes the shameless hand and jerks away the cup! The button-pusher does not drink what was ordered; and the fluid of shame spills, spreading in a frothy lake across the floor.

(122)

The narrative focuses on the career, corruptions and rivalries of the two main characters Iskandar Harappa and RazaHyder. They stand of the contemporary history of Pakistan and tell the story of a small group of people who are responsible for the making of history and controlling of power. Syed Mujeebuddin in his article "Centre and Margins: Shame's 'Other' Nation" says: "Is a brilliant 'technical resolution' and successfully reflects the monopolistic

structure of dictatorial power and the very narrow social spectrum within which this power in Pakistan circulates” (133).

As *Shame* illustrates, the history of Pakistan records a chain of war and black comedy. It is a grotesque drama of a medieval jingo of nationalism, secularism, mass- elections etc. Iskandar Harappa the immoral dandy- turned President who tries to westernise the country in no time. And dictator RazaHyder who reads Namaz in T.V five times a day and made the people to be more religious with his compulsion. He says that religion brings dignity and encourages creativity. It is not mere ritual, superstitions or black magic, but it gives faith to people perhaps one’s own identity in the means of moral law.

The climax reaches with the hanging of the chairman Harappa. Rushdie sums up about his destiny that is “six years in power, two in jail, and eternity underground”(178). Harappa and his daughter Arjumand later came to power through elections which were not totally straightforward. The elections caused great confusion among the people. They were not able to locate the ballot boxes and a single person voted for more than twelve times. “How could they be in that country divided into two wings a thousand miles apart, sundered by the land-mass its greatest foe, joined by nothing but God” (178).

The country pointed out that the main receiver of the Civil War was Harappa in the West and his daughter. It was him who suspected his complicity in the whole affair which ripped the country into half. But Harappa at rally attended by two million people unbuttoned his shirt and shouted: “What have I to hide? They say I have benefited; but I have lost fully half my beloved country. Then tell me is this gain? Is this advantages? Is this luck? My people your hearts are scarred by grief, behold, my heart bears the same wounds as yours” (180).

Storytelling is a prevalent theme in Rushdie's novels and it adds to the complex layers of his postmodern text. In coding the narrative of Sufiya's exploits is the intermixing of genres between the real and the fantasy. The use of the first person narration of "I" in the novel is like a fairytale. As the narrator asks so many times throughout the text, "who is SufiyaZinobia,?" but the novel reflects the life and circumstance of the history and politics of Pakistan. Therefore the novel despites the historical background with its fictional work. Rushdie has communicated the politics and cultural issues through this literary piece of work.

Sushila Singh comments on Rushdie's novel *Shame* in his article "Shame: Salman Rushdie's Judgement on Pakistan" that:

Through his glittering prose and skilfully arranged story Rushdie has emerged as the chief literary executer of Pakistan's political testament, if not its leading chronicles. The novel is a sort of black joke on one of the worst dictatorship. It's an exquisite feat, free-flight-fairy-tale, allegory, hilarious entertainment and on-the-spot reportage rolled into one. (23)

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