

THEMES AND ISSUES IN THE FICTION OF SALMAN RUSHDIE

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The post-colonial migrant literature foregrounds and celebrates a historical 'weightlessness' as Salman Rushdie puts it. The experience of cultural transplantation lends new perspectives and creative possibilities for the post-colonial writers and they have fashioned astounding artistic patterns. Located in the metropolitan West they tend to recreate the contemporary social milieu and cultural crisis in their native land and attempt to redefine it in the emerging post-colonial context. They mix the past, the present and the future and the imperial and the colonial cultures in their fiction, dislocating time and subverting the imperial purpose in the process. Received history is tampered with, rewritten and realigned from the point of view of the victims of its deconstructive progress. They explore and expose the residual effects of foreign domination in the political, social and economic spheres.

Many of the various issues dealt with in Salman Rushdie's works have been of great significance in his own life. Establishing the link between his biography and his work shall illuminate Rushdie's conception of identity and also point out themes that are dealt with in much of his work. Rushdie's written versions of these issues can thus often be explained when we regard the former as altered mirror images of his experiences that include impressions and events. One of the most prevalent themes Rushdie discusses is migrancy and, through association, what it means to live between different cultures. Taking into account how many migrations Rushdie has undertaken and what a deep impact they have left on him, it can hardly be surprising that the phenomenon of migrancy, which has become a globalized phenomenon and thus increasingly important, is explored in great depth. Besides this, dispossession, cultural fragmentation, colonial and neo-colonial power structures, post-colonial corruption, cultural degeneration and the crisis of identity are some other major preoccupations in the writings of Salman Rushdie.

In *Midnight's Children*, the political history is the starting point of the quest for identity. Saleem Sinai announces his emergence into this world in a moment of political reality. The world of Azids, the progenitors of the three generations of the Muslims is the beginning of the narrative. The historical recreation of the individual destiny is realized as part of an imaginative device in fulfilling the larger thematic purpose, namely, the search for identity in Saleem Sinai's mind.

This wavering between the supposed 'alien-ness' and real 'rootedness' at least in some profound manner, provides the essential thematic focus of the narrative. The

emerging political scenario, the introduction of the world of politics and the politicians is related to the narrator's world.

How many things, people, and notions we bring with us into the world, how many possibilities and also restrictions of possibility! Because of the child born that midnight, and for every one of the midnight children there were as many more. Among the parents of the midnight: the failure of the Cabinet Scheme;... chicken-breast-eater of a wife; and more and his Red Fort and Old Fort ...To understand just one life, you have to swallow the world.

The theme of identity operates with grim intensity and purpose. The political or even politico-cultural and other themes of India's national development are artistically and emotionally well integrated into the motif of quest for identity of Saleem Sinai. As his quest is essentially spiritual, the historical detail only becomes a transitory phase in his growingly temporal awareness of the world of facts into an introvert world of intuitive perception of reality through Fantasy, or Dream and Memory.

Though Saleem Sinai truly and most vitally placed in India's national history, by birth he tragically drifts away from it. As he is a close observer as also a witness of the national growth, over a period of nearly three decades, he is constantly disillusioned with it. Like Omar Khayyam, afterwards, he also becomes a 'peripheral hero' of post-independence India. As a result of the tragic negation of his relationship with the Indian national history, his drift into history-less anonymity and silence is inevitable. However, as a form of fulfilment, in his quest for true identity, Saleem Sinai takes recourse to fantasy to seek his roots with the Indian psyche, through fantasy and memory of a bygone past, though not in its recent past, which in any case negated him. Thus, Saleem Sinai moves in and out of Time in the narrative. When he is in Time, that is, as 'observing', but in no case participating in its national history, it is a matter of pain and disillusionment for him. On the other hand, in his drift into fantasy and memory, Saleem Sinai establishes his roots, howsoever tenuously, with at least a little amount of fulfilment.

Saleem Sinai seeks the medium of Fantasy for various purposes, both for liberation and attachment. As the fantastic mode is a Timeless construct, he can retrieve himself into his troubled psyche and resolve his national identity between Indian and Pakistan there. Memory or reminiscing with a degree of objectivity and authenticity serves such a purpose. His method of memory is by sensory perception more particularly that of taste. In any case, this emphasis on memory, as a form of objectivity and negating Time is different from his history-less and anonymous role as Buddha.

The narrator feels that his identity is not safe in Pakistan where words and action are quite contrary to each other. He sees Pakistani world as a world of falseness and unreality. In any case, his re-entry into India, the world of alternative realities after the 1965 war is yet again realized in a world of fantasy. This fantastic drift in the 'air-lanes of the sub-continent offers Saleem and opportunity to seek identity with the entire sub-

continent psyche. In any case, the quest for identity it not settled in his ‘anonymous’ drift into India and Pakistan. His Indian roots are as yet not fully established:

Anyway it was not 'my' country or not then. Not my country, although I stayed in it- as a refugee, not citizen." Saleem's quest for the national identity with India is both a historical and personal necessity. At least, his grandfather Adam Aziz appears rooted in the Indian psyche, in some degree, as he tells his friend the Rani Cooch Naheen thus: "I started off as a Kashmiri and not much of a Muslim. Then I got a bruise on the chest that turned me into an Indian....

Saleem probes into the entire Indian phenomena to obtain his absolute identity. As a result, Saleem's quest becomes a genealogical necessity. In continuation of his quest from the levels of memory and fantasy, Saleem enters a world of anonymity. As he constantly roams and moves in the ‘air-lanes’ of the subcontinent, for identity, he feels himself not only alienated by the psyche of India and Pakistan, alike, but loses his own self and identity as an individual, and reaches a state of history-less anonymity.

The Bangladesh War provides such a context for Saleem to further feel the bruised psyche of the Indian subcontinent, as he is outside the values of both India and Pakistan. He is a denuded self, fully disintegrated in time his growing sense of identity troubles him a lot. His drift is from memory into total forgetfulness "With some embarrassment, I am forced to admit that amnesia is the kind of gimmick regularly used by our lurid filmmakers."

His ultimate drift into Sunderbans, the jungle away from civilization, is an occasion for the total loss of identity, in any for As the name Sunderban itself suggests the bewildering beauty that makes one complete out of senses, out of rationality and logic. He is without any purpose in life, as his disintegrated mind and self are irretrievably lost in utter timelessness. As Saleem is even beyond any kind of rationale of dreams of memory, he seeks to retrieve his lost self from the depths of total anonymity and forgetfulness, with the emphasis on the words "longing for flight into the safety of dreams...." However, his ‘reincarnation’ or ‘re-realization’ into Reality from anonymity and fantasy, alike, is done by the ‘tantriks’ of snake poison, which instead of killing him, retrieves him, metaphorically though, into memory from amnesia.

He shows a universal longing. The narrator feels himself a part of universe and feels himself within universe or vice-versa. His retrieval at least into fantasy from anonymity follows the need for sensation. ".....I had been rescued by rebellion from the abstraction of numbness; as I bumped out on the dirt of the magician ghetto, silver spittoon in hand, I realized that I had begun, once again, to feel."

The fictional world seeks to redeem itself from these acts of shame, or Sharam. Saleem Sinai could not succeed in the quest for identity. His quest for identity with the Indian psyche is as much unsettled in its ultimate meaning, as it is in the mind quest of Saleem Sinai in his identity with an anonymous country. However, between these two

moving realities of India and Pakistan, Saleem wants to establish his identity with the entire Indian subcontinent. For, his quest is not nationally limited to either India or Pakistan but largely universal. "The terrible fatalism which had overcome me of late had taken on an even more terrible form; drowning in the disintegration of family, of both countries to which I had belonged, of everything which can sanely be called real."

The occasion is the further bruising of the sub-continental psyche with its partition into Bangladesh. The theme of identity in its broad historical terms may be defined as national identity, Saleem Sinai; but in its intrinsic value and meaning this quest becomes an 'interiorized' reality and an aspect of their own emotional and life patterns. In this context, the question of expatriation for Rushdie is symbolic of such a predicament for himself. Unlike Saleem Sinai, Rushdie has to establish his emotional identity with yet another national situation, that is, England. As Rushdie tells us with an almost morbid and recurrent emphasis.

Shame is Salman Rushdie's third novel, published in 1983. The novel begins with an account of the unusual birth and circumstances of Omar Khayyam Shakil. After the death of their father, three sisters sequester themselves in their home, using a specially built dumbwaiter to send out items to be pawned and to bring in supplies. One of them is pregnant, but all three exhibit symptoms and all three are considered the child's mother. In addition, the sisters become indistinguishable. They are resolved to raise their son without any sense of *sharam*. Omar eventually escapes the house physically, but he carries with him the impact of his upbringing.

There are instances of female empowerment mostly ending in violence and these instances, however misrepresented, do offer the readers some insight into the psyche of women of the subcontinent. Storytelling is a prevalent theme in Rushdie's novels, and 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". 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". Her stories were altered, when necessary, to 'maintain the grip on honor'. 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. He explains, "..... stories, such stories, were the glue that held the clan together, binding the generations in webs of whispered secrets. Her story altered, at first, in the retellings, but finally it settled down, and after that nobody, neither teller nor listener, would tolerate any deviation from the hallowed, sacred text". 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.

In *Shame* Rushdie's attempt towards bringing in a feminist perspective or understanding in this male dominated world that he situates his narrator in? Is he through this literary work trying to give a voice to the female of his species or narrowing it down still to the women of the same culture, race, history and socio-economic conditions as himself? How successful is he in this endeavour remains to be seen and hopefully by the end of this chapter we would have reached a conclusion about whether the labels of misogyny and anti-women hold true for the novel or not. We will start our discussion by talking about the various women characters in the novel and trying to establish a pattern, if any, in their characterization. Bariamma, literally translated as the Big Mother, is the matriarch of the Hyder family. She lords over the entire household and yet it is evident that the control she exercises is in the private sphere and not in the public eye. This notion of the private versus the public life will be explored a little later in the essay. Rushdie imparts a quasi-prophet like quality to this story-teller Bariamma. She is the one who decides the manner in which other people's stories have to be recounted; it is she who alters Bilquis's tale of flight during partition and it so happens that "... Neither teller nor listener, would tolerate any deviation from the hallowed sacred text. This was when Bilquis knew that she had become a member of the family; in the sanctification of her tale laid initiation, kinship, blood."

Coming to Omar Khayyam's three mothers, we see them not as individuals but as a fused triumvirate identity. Even though Rushdie has given them names, their identities are circumscribed only by their relationship first to their father and after his death as Omar's mothers. They deal with the shame of an unwed pregnancy by refusing to divulge the name of the actual mother, sequestering themselves from the outside world and going to extreme lengths to maintain the faade of a triple maternity. Rushdie imparts them with the courage to bring in to this world their illegitimate offspring; yet again they do it by cloistering themselves within their private sphere and completely renouncing the public arena.

Chunni, Munni and Bunny are symbolic of India, Pakistan and Britain respectively and Rushdie as narrator and writer sees himself as the peripheral versioned Omar. Like Omar who cannot trace his ancestry in terms of both maternity and paternity, Rushdie too cannot identify himself with one particular country. He, like Omar, belongs to all three mother countries not knowing who begot and nurtured him as a writer. Omar's choice of freedom as his gift on his twelfth birthday can be seen as a parallel to Rushdie's *Shame* as a 'novel of leave-taking'. Aijaz Ahmad calls *Midnight's Children* and *Shame* "novels of leave-taking: not from the East, surely but, more particularly, first from the

country of his birth (India) and then from that second country (Pakistan) where he tried, half-heartedly, to settle down and couldn't."

Rani Harappa and Bilquis are two important characters in the novel. Bilquis, running from the burning fires of partition with only a duppatta to cover her modesty, finds refuge in the arms of Raza Hyder who subsequently marries her. Rani Humayun gets married off to the dashing, debonair Iskander Harappa and it is after their respective marriages that we see them getting more and more entrenched in their prescribed roles as wives and mothers. Bilquis, unable to come to terms with giving birth to the wrong miracle Sufiya and unable to produce the prophesied male heir, slowly retracts within herself; her covering herself within layers of Burqa or veil is symbolic of her inner retrenchment from the outside world. The veil actually becomes a shroud, reminiscent of the duppatta, which finally engulfs her sanity. Rani Harappa, also like Bilquis, becomes a mere shadow of the woman she once used to be. The narrator considers Raza's treatment of Bilquis more humane than the total disregard and indifference that Iskander shows Rani. Rushdie seems to suggest that Hyder, Iskander and Omar are products of a postcolonial past; their abusive or dominating behaviour can be seen as an effort to restore and re-establish their diminished power over if not their colonial oppressors then their women at least.

'Sharam' is identified as a sign of a woman's purity; in a way suggesting that a chaste woman would not have the stirrings of sexuality within her. This concept finds roots in Islamic fundamentalism which considers women as simply objects of desire whose presence on earth is to satisfy a man's need for carnal pleasure and procreation. Such a base perception of woman leaves her completely bereft of any identity and rationality. The Islamic court in fact bestows woman with only half the status of that of a man. Fadia Faqir says that 'Already Existing Islam' calls for the Muslim woman to be 'hidden' and 'silent'. According to her, "Already Existing Islam is misogynous and strives to restrict women to a small, private space." This thought of misogyny finds an echo in Ahmad's assessment of the novel as a misogynous text. Unable to express her sexuality the character of Sufiya Zinobia, who is shame personified, gives vent to her frustration in the totally gruesome yet comedic episode of the Turkey beheadings. In her next episode of violence, incapable of fathoming the reason behind her unconsummated state of marriage, she mates with four youths on the streets and like the Black Widow Spider kills them all after the act.

The whole novel is interspersed with incidents of sexual oppression and also suppression where women are not allowed to express their feminine identity in a sexual manner. Bound within the confines of honour and shame, she cannot get pass the fact that she bore Sufiya, the wrong miracle, and slowly fades away into her own silence. The female spokesperson of her oppressive male counterpart, so seems to articulate that such repression ultimately culminates in violence.

The reaction against the repressive purdah system leads to violence. Thus in the novel Shame the dress code of purdah is intimately related to the repression of women in

a patriarchal society. Purdah can be literal or metaphorical and can affect all aspects of human existence- man-woman, woman-woman, interfamily relationships, social bonds and conventions and economic and educational freedoms. But on a deeper level it may mean the invisible restraints imposed by a patriarchal society upon the freedom of women to prevent their free interaction with men or from interference in public duties. Therefore in the novel *Shame* Rushdie depicts the negative aspects of the purdah system, which erases the identity of women behind veils of ordinariness.

It is also an attempt to replace monotheism by polytheism, which is supposed to be more complex, as it comprises more elements. "This is the world into which Mahound has brought his message: one one one Amid such multiplicity, it sounds like a dangerous word." Hind's religion thus seems to represent Hinduism, but a form of Hinduism that fosters extremism and that has thus become alienated from Hinduism's original ideas: it is, like Mahound's religion, intolerant towards other faiths, and abuses power in the form of oppression on a regular basis. "Between Allah and the Three there can be no peace. I don't want it. I want the fight. To the death; that is the kind of idea I am."

But the Italians are rivaled, even surpassed, by the Indian sirens. Khazanda Begum is universally acknowledged at least by all her servants and courtiers as the most beautiful woman in the world, until Qara Köz, i.e. Black Eyes, is born. "From that day forward, Khazanda noticed a change in the timbre of her daily adoration, which began to contain a higher level of insincerity than was acceptable." And then there's Jodha, the Emperor's fantasy come to life. Among her myriad erotic skills, she is consummately adept at "the seven types of unguiculation, which is to say the art of using the nails to enhance the act of love." Rushdie cites examples of the seven types, all clearly derived from the *Kama Sutra* book two, chapter four, if you're interested. As Jodha says, "When a boy dreams up a woman he gives her big breasts and a small brain. . . . When a king imagines a wife he dreams of me."

The Enchantress of Florence mainly lingers in the memory as a paean to the power of beauty, it is also a meditation on power, tout court. The world can turn against beauty, just as it can turn against intelligence or spiritual conviction or noble ideals. Machiavelli soon to write *The Prince* warns the Mughal princess: "This is Florence, my lady, and you will live well here, for Florentines know how to live well. But if you are sensible, you will always know where the back door is. You will plan your escape route and keep it in good working order. For when the Arno floods all those without boats are drowned".

Akbar, the Great begins to wonder about the nature of his sovereignty and about the self, the universe, religion and the growing interaction between East and West: "Was foreignness itself a thing to be embraced as a revitalizing force bestowing bounty and success upon its adherents, or did it adulterate something essential in the individual and the society as a whole, did it initiate a process of decay which would end in an alienated,

inauthentic death?" Akbar, in fact, daydreams of universal harmony on Earth but sadly recognizes that all his power can never make it happen:

Once he was gone, all he had thought, all he had worked to make, his philosophy and way of being, all that would evaporate like water. smash their places of worship and kill one another once again in the renewed heat of the great quarrel he had sought to end forever, the quarrel over God. In the future it was harshness, not civilization that would rule.

There are other powerful enchantments in this novel. Renaissance Florence and Mogul India are brought noisily, nastily and splendidly back to life. Rushdie has irreverent fun with figures such as Botticelli, his muse for the Primavera, and Machiavelli, who feature in the back story. The two cultures create an opportunity for exhilarating switches of perspective. This book is unusually concupiscent, even for Rushdie. Overexcited, perhaps, by the Kama Sutra, which he cites as a source, Rushdie goes to town with scenes of harem life and brothels. This novel is as much a celebration of sex, of every kind and degree of expertise, as it is of the potency of tale-telling.

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