

**THE SHADOW OF POSTCOLONIAL IDEAS AS REFLECTED IN
SALMAN RUSHDIE'S *SHAME***

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Abstract

The central concern of the paper is to highlight the Postcolonial ideological substratum in *Shame*. In addition to this, the nightmarish and monochromatic Pakistani reality has been examined, satirized and ridiculed from the perspective of Rushdie who has his roots fixed in undivided India and drawn sustenance from its values. He looks back with nostalgia at the old world of his Indian childhood as continuity and a reality as different from the facts of his present faraway life as illusion.

The basic ingredient of postcolonial Literature is the English Language is not the Queen's English but the other English. Therefore, Indian English Literature written since independence may be said to be born of free India. But a reasonable time span was really required for this curious cultural phenomenon. Thus we may call it Postcolonial literature in general, for Postcolonial Studies have been gaining momentum since 1970. Postcolonialism is a theory that seeks to understand how oppression, resistance and adaptation occurred during colonial rule. In Leela Gandhi's words, postcolonialism can be seen as a theoretical resistance to the mystifying amnesia of the colonial aftermath. It is a disciplinary project devoted to the academic task of revisiting, remembering, and crucially, interrogating the colonial past. The process of returning to the colonial scene discloses a relationship of reciprocal antagonism and desire between colonizer and colonized. And it is in the unfolding of this troubled and troubling relationship that we might start to discern the ambivalent prehistory of the postcolonial condition.

Postcolonialism has been gaining importance since 1970s. Some of the theoreticians date its appearance in the Western Academic circle with the publication of Edward Said's influential work *Orientalism* published in 1978. According to Pramod K. Nayar: Postcoloniality refers to the historical, material and actual living conditions of newly-independent Asian, African, and South American states within the global system. It refers to the economic and political conditions in the countries such as India after the European ruler handed over the political powers to the native population. It was left to the local populace to choose how to rule their own liberated land. It was a time of anxiety and confusion, of assimilation and transformation.

Now let us turn to the central point of our discussion regarding how *Shame* configures in the shadow of the postcolonial ideas. *Shame* is a fictional transformation of the ruling class family of Pakistan. It is possible to see the history of post-independent India as one torn by strife, uncertainty, chaos and rampant corruption, but mostly Indian English novelists remained aloof and secure from the many shocks of post-independent India. The political security or complacency that Indian writers mostly enjoyed both in pre and post-independent India has turned them into an "elitist" class after independence, notwithstanding the several other progressive movements in regional literatures coming up as mushrooms such as Dalit and or feminist writings. The objective of Post-colonial literature is to focus on the past and present social milieu including the political situation, involving the colonial legacy and the retinue of its disturbing features. Laura Chrisman is of the view that a nation's contemporary literature cannot be isolated from the imperial history, which produced the contemporary version of the nation. (1990:38)

The concept of postcolonialism is one of the most significant "isms" and it is one that has enabled a new and radical discourse in the history of twentieth century criticism, to be matched only by postmodernism. In my point of view these two terms are the two sides of the same coin. The reasons for this are not far to find. Indra Mohan in his journal *The Indian Review of World Literature in English, Vol. 2, No.II – Jul, 2006* has opined that, postcolonialism in the contemporary sense speaks of a new intellectual life and a force on a discursive part the western theory. However, the political dismantling did not immediately extend to imperial cultural influences, but it was attended by an unprecedented assertion of creative activity in postcolonial societies. Postcolonial literatures are by and large a result of this interaction between imperial culture and the complex of indigenous cultural practices. Though the colonies once subjected to imperial rules are now free, they are still subject in one way or another to covert or subtle forms of new colonial domination in the form of language and cultural interactions. In 1985 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak threw a challenge to the race and class blindness of the western academy, asking "Can the Subaltern Speak?" By the term Subaltern Spivak meant the oppressed subjects, the members of Antonio Gramsci's subaltern classes or more generally those of inferior rank, and her question followed on the work began in the early 1980s by a collective of intellectuals now known as the subaltern theorists in the field of South Asian Studies. Subaltern studies defined itself as an attempt to allow the people to speak within the pages of elitist historiography and, in doing so, to speak for, or to sound the muted voices of the truly oppressed and free them from the burden of the language of power.

Postcolonialism is the study of the political idea of liberation in all its aspects. In *Shame*, Sufiya becomes a destroyer of men, and finally murders her husband, the peripheral hero, Omar Khayyam Shakil. The Indian sub-continent has an ancient civilization which distinctly marks a

difference from the west. It is significant that in the palimpsest of the shawl the west is history and the east is literature.

The Pakistani post-colonial history is the history of powerful dictatorship and hence, it is the history of the usurper class represented by Iskander Harappa and Raza Hyder; these fictional names are caricatures modeled on Bhutto and Zia-ul-Haq, the real life Pakistani rulers. The counter-history is presented as the women's story. The matriarch Bariamme's sardonic telling of Raza Hyder's tale, her story of the "strong man of the nation", (*Shame* 78) which is melodramatic, and this sense of melodrama permeates the whole book, right to the final denouement where we find that the dictators cannot cross the frontier and escape the cage that is the country of Pakistan. The sense that Pakistan is a cage is already there in the opening episodes where the Shakil sisters, the three mothers of the peripheral hero Omar Khayyam Shakil, are cloistered first by their father, the patriarch of a macabre mansion with whose death the narrative begins, and then cloister themselves after their one hedonistic night in which their son is conceived.

The macabre mansion is very much like a cage for the women in purdah so also is the state of Pakistan. Even though Pakistan is nominally free from colonial power, we still find the people under the shackles. We can give the example of the status of women in the Islamic dictatorship under which women wear burqa and are always confined within the four walls of the house. They are forced to wear the burqa so as to keep themselves from the snares of men. There are similarly varied forms of slavery being practiced in Pakistani society. These sorts of dictatorial power are presented in Rushdie's *Shame*. Hence we can say that *Shame* presents postcolonial ideas configured and allegorized through different characters and images, events and incidents. For example, dominant Pakistani figures like Iskander Harappa (Bhutto), and Raza Hyder (Zia) two presidents of Pakistan. We also see, how Bhutto, seeking to perpetuate his power by keeping the army in his pocket, appointed the most incompetent general as commander in chief so that he need not fear insubordination or an army take over. But that was a stupid idea and a matter of shame. Rushdie depicts such shameful events in *Shame*. This plot device of turning all the antagonists into relatives is a "wonderful technical resolution for reflecting the monopolistic structure of dictatorial power and the very narrow social spectrum within which this power in Pakistan circulates." (Ahmad 141) Hence the rhetorical stance of the book as the experience of a country is to be seen in the light of the existence of a civil society in Pakistan, which shares the same boundary with the state structures, equally deformed and irretrievably marked by its purported civilization (Islam) and its generic origin (the Pakistan). Hence the narrator lampoons over the democratic pretention of the late Zulfikar Ali Bhutto through the fictional portrait of Iskander Harappa and foretells the rise of female power, which one of the major oppressed groups, and the return of Benazir Bhutto (*Shame*, 126).

We can sum up that the novel *Shame* may be read as a document of Postcoloniality, a myth of the nation, a critique of dictatorship, and a work that may be safely located in the counter-canon of the third world literature. The author himself wants his major novels to be read as "Third-world" texts because the themes of these texts are mainly deal with the colonial determination of our modernity, the persistence of postcoloniality, the myths of nationhood and independence, and the myths and gods of India. However, the experience of postcolonialism in the Indian context involves a situation specifically peculiar to the Indian subcontinent. The fact remains that Rushdie does not only ridicule an India free of colonial rule that Nehru and his party had brought into being, but laments over the damages done to the vision of a free country in the

succeeding years. As a free human being living in the postcolonial era beneath the saga of mixed cultures he lays bare the dramatic events of recent postcolonial history, the post-Ajodhya scenario, the Bombay bomb blasts, Rajiv Gandhi's assassination and life in the metropolis which is controlled by the underworld dons and white-clad politicians in nexus with them. Rushdie has travelled a long way from India to Pakistan notwithstanding the bleakness which envelops his vision of Postcoloniality and he has faith in Pakistan's plurality and largeness teaming with life. Sufiya Zinobia a sole sufferer in the novel opens up our eyes that in the present society there are many Sufiyas who are crying for help and suffering miserably from gender discrimination is being a female in a male dominated society. But suffering can be used as stimulation for empowerment.

There are good many reasons for Rushdie to reflect his version of the reality of Pakistan through fragments of broken mirrors in a zig-zag fashion. The narrator's monologue records the experiences of poet friend in Karachi in a telling manner:

Since my last visit to Karachi, my friend the poet had spent many months in jail, for social reasons. That is to say, he knows somebody who knows somebody who has the wife of the second cousin by marriage of the step uncle of somebody who might or might not have shared a flat with someone who was running guns to the guerillas in Baluchistan. (*Shame* 35)

This shows the maze that is Pakistan. It is a reflection of how the people experience the reality in Pakistan. The narrator similarly takes pains to explain why his book is not a realistic novel:

If this were a realistic novel about Pakistan, I would not be writing about Bilquis the wind: I would be talking about my youngest sister, who is twenty-two, and studying engineering in Karachi: who can't sit on her chair any more, and who (unlike me) is Pakistani citizen (*Shame* 68)

"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, the same way as I have learned my growing sister..." (*Shame* 69).

In any case this novel was banned in Pakistan just because Rushdie had portrayed some real personalities. In spite of Rushdie's acknowledgement: "By now, if I had been writing a book of this nature, it would have done me no good to protest that I was writing universally, not only about Pakistan. The book would have been banned, damned in the rubbish bin, burned. All that effort for nothing! Realism can break a writer's heart". (*Shame* 70) In spite of this *Shame* was banned in Pakistan. Thakur Guruprasad in his *The Zig-Zig Trajectory of Shame in Rushdie's Novel* observes that there is an "unimpeachable literary tradition to support Rushdie's decision to resort to fantasy for purpose of exposing the society that he was forced to join for a while as a result of the partition of British India, and to debunk the political as well as theoretical dictators and no less the female dictators in burqa in the preposterous society of provincial Pakistan." (*Commonwealth Fiction* 54)

Shame's postmodern structure allows Rushdie to write a changeable national narrative whose 'history' responds situationally to the political circumstances of the present. To put this more simply, *Shame's* writing of the national past is revisionist. The past is shaped retroactively, taking on the political character of the present. As part of this strategy, Rushdie writes a provisional, partial history appropriate to the impoverished politics of post-partition Pakistan.

This means that *Shame* exhibits a particular kind of formal response to the imagining of a community. In the post-independence years, the postcolonial novel frequently undertakes a writing of national identity that can be read in terms of a modernist quest for them. Out of many possible and available terms to describe the issue of this complex postcolonial situation, fragmentation is applied in *Shame*, fragments are understood to constitute reality, and ever more so in the context of the mosaic of postcolonial nations, nationalities and nationals. Rushdie has written *Imaginary Homelands*, where he has described past and present countries which have to be imagined because information can be gained fragmentarily and because memories and experiences are all shattered and partial as they are in *Shame* at a slight angle to reality. Following this strain, the narrator of *Shame* describes Pakistan as a place which was “insufficiently imagined,” irreconcilably fragmented. Primarily ‘shame’ refers to the people who have shamelessly to bear witness to the truth: especially the three Shakil sisters, Omar Khayyam, Sufiya Zinobia. They are the central figures who have undergone changes in their lives. It also refers to the process of fantasizing a future and a past to fit in the present. We get some glimpses of or fragments of postcolonial ideology in *Shame* in the personality of some political figures as I have earlier mentioned. Rushdie as a child of independent India wants to commemorate the mythic bygone days and just dreaming the condition of the newly obtained land, and *Shame* offers a somewhat mythical interpretation of the cotemporary world. The end of the novel *Shame* may suggest that Omar Shakil and his mothers have no place in the world, because they all die and vanish into the ether. Similarly the migrants, Rushdie mentions earlier in the novel, they “floated upward from history, from memory, from time”. (*Shame* 85) This lack of place in society is symbolic of the exilic migrant, a central figure in postcolonial literatures. Rushdie is telling the story of a great tragedy, a culture of shame which, if we view and follow Rushdie’s logic, is synonymous with a culture of violence and the acceptance of this shame and violence by its own populace, and the west’s contribution to this shame and violence. Indeed, violence is not limited to Pakistan, it also stretches its wings to other nations where human rights have been thoroughly violated. In one acute meta-narrative passage Rushdie directs our attention to the sense of shame or shamelessness in the west. The novel enables a complex understanding of the heritage of colonialism in Pakistan, but requires the readers to excavate cultural norms such as the west’s Orientalist tendencies and the East’s dialectic of honour and shame to better understand the historical complicities and absurdities of postcolonial modernity.

In *Shame* Rushdie delineates Pakistan as a palimpsest: “it is the true desire of every artist to impose his or her vision on the world; and Pakistan the peeling, fragmenting, palimpsest, increasingly at war with itself, may be described as the failure of the dreaming mind.” (*Shame* 87) But changes are obvious reasons to come and build the nation all over again. Colonial aftermath has opened new vistas of life and has uncovered latent possibilities and made impossible things possible. When I read this novel of Rushdie I am reminded of Gayatri Spivak’s motivating essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” In fact the subaltern can speak if given a chance. The time is ripe- “the centre cannot hold, falcon cannot hear the Falconer” as W.B. Yeats in his celebrated poem *The Second Coming* says. As Saleem’s words go on “On the stroke of midnight clock-hands joined palms in respectful greeting as I came...at the precise instant of India’s arrival at Independence, I trembled into the World”- as a matter of fact, this is the spirit of postcolonialism, getting a new lease of life.

M. Madhusudhan Rao in his book *Salman Rushdie’s Fiction: a Study* mentions: “Rushdie’s world view is basically idealistic and utopian. His quest as an expatriate, in some

form or the other, makes him look back naturally upon the Indian subcontinent of his birth belonging with nostalgic.” (162) In *Shame* Rushdie while showing how shame is a part of the architecture of the society that the novel describes, how Pakistanis grow upon a ‘diet of honor and shame’ (115). ‘But shame is like everything else, live with it for long enough and it becomes part of the furniture’. (28). Duncan Ivison proposes a postcolonial liberalism based on the liberal values and ways of thinking. The ultimate aim of Ivison’s postcolonial liberalism is to ‘foster a form of mutually acceptable coexistence between indigenous and non-indigenous people.’ (*Postcolonial Theory: An introduction*, 16)

Rushdie’s postcolonial vision here visibly comes to the fore:

Outsider! Trespasser! You have no right to this subject! ..I know; nobody ever arrested me. Nor are they ever likely to. Poacher! Pirate! We reject your authority. We know you, with your foreign language’ wrapped around you like a flag: speaking about us in your forked tongue, what can you tell but lies? I reply with more questions: Is history to be considered the property of the participants solely? In what courts are such claims staked, what boundary commission’s map out the territories? Can only the dead speak? (*Shame* 28)

Pradip, K. Dey, in his essay *Shame and Midnight’s Children: A Postcolonial Critique* considers *Shame* as a politico-historical novel “writing of the history of great generals and heroes and great events have since disappeared from the European canon giving rise to a counter-canon of post-modern and post-colonial neo-history. In fact Rushdie has been very successful in the dismantling and unmasking of the western master-narrative of history” (90). *Shame* too articulates the ambition for honour, power, prestige, like the Shakespearean tragedies, the tragic heroes, Greek and Roman heroes such as Achilles, Brutus and Antony died for the sake of name and fame. This is the meta-historical aspect of the theme.

All of Rushdie works reflect postcolonial images, dreams and fantasy. *Shame* was the beginning of his career as a writer, writing about the East in a very controversial way, for which he had to pay heavily later on. This novel has been banned in Pakistan for his realistic portrayal of some political figures of Pakistani government. As a matter of fact the novelist’s sensibility is basically democratic, secular and humanistic. Indian myths and legends have been so extensively used in *Midnight’s children* and even in *Shame* that one may perhaps get glimpses of goddess Kali in the retributive and murderous Sufiya Zinobia and of the legendary demons in Raza Hyder. In fact, as we have seen, throughout *Shame*, the nightmarish and monochromatic Pakistani reality has been examined, satirized and ridiculed from the perspective of one who has his roots fixed in undivided India and drawn sustenance from its values. He looks back with nostalgia at the old world of his Indian childhood as continuity and a reality as different from the facts of his present faraway life as illusion.

The reality recorded in *Shame* may be imaginary truth, as Rushdie suggests, though, as we have seen, it is not all so imaginary. What is more important, however, is that the novel crystallizes a good deal of historical sound sense and a deep sensibility which is both Indian and universal. *Shame* not only relates to Pakistan, but it relates to India, it relates to Asia, it relates to most of the Third world.

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