



Voices and Voyages: A Study of Rushdie's Shame

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Abstract: *Salman Rushdie was born in Bombay in 1947 and moved with his parents to Karachi, Pakistan, in 1961 when he was fourteen years old. He was sent to Rugby School in England the next year. Rushdie attended Cambridge University after graduating from Rugby with a degree in history in 1968. After all, he became an expatriate and resided in London. Thus, his early mental constitution was influenced by migration and the anguish of having dual allegiances. Either directly or indirectly, dislocation, exile, and a revolt against ingrained value systems result in the sensation of alienation. Thus, migration takes on symbolic meaning for the human predicament in Rushdie's writing. This essay seeks to capture the many facets of Anglo-Indian author Salman Rushdie, who feels obliged to confront his background as an immigrant to England. Perhaps the only recurrent topic in his works is the search for identity.*

Rushdie's third book, *Shame* (1983), explores Pakistan's murky religious and political landscape. In order to highlight the ridiculousness and cultural void that existed in Pakistan throughout the 20th century, Rushdie employs an analogy from fairy tales that clearly contains political allegory. The narrative persona is an appearance of the writer's alter ego. In *Shame*, the narrator weaves together his own experience as a migrant with Pakistan's historical background to create an inadequately conceived nation: Even with his well-known dislike of Pakistan—a failing of the imagination—¹ As the narrator, Rushdie compares the situation of a nation founded out of secession to his own circumstances as a migrant, leading him to feel a strange kind of empathy for it: What does the migrant population and seceded countries have going for them? I believe it to be their optimism.² Rushdie views this release as having two sides, even if he is lured to the postmodern delights of floating "upwards from history, from memory, from Time"³. It is necessary to rewrite the past as a palimpsest that "obscures what lies beneath" because the new country of Pakistan must write its own history.⁴ People who are used to "living in a land older than time..... being told to think of themselves, as well as the country itself, as new"⁵. Paradoxically, individuals who migrate or mohajir as refugees from Indian Punjab into Pakistan take on the task of rewriting history. Once again, Rushdie admits his affinity—this time as an artist—with those who want to alter history:

"It is true desire of every artist to impose his or her vision on the world..... I too, like all migrants, am a fantasist. I build imaginary countries and try to impose them on the ones that exist, I, too, face the problem of history: what to retain, what to dump, how to hold on to what memory insists on relinquishing how to deal with change."⁶

The 'marginal man' is a product of two or more social worlds and is posed in psychological uncertainty of these worlds. What is remarkable is the way Rushdie has made migrancy a fructifying experience for himself. He has been benefited from what he called the double perspective of the migrant writer who simultaneously commanded the perspectives of both the insider and the outsider. Rushdie describes the world from this point of view of the migrant narrator. As he would say, "To migrate is to experience deep changes and wrenches in the soul, but the migrant is not simply transformed by his act, he also transforms the new world. Migrants might well become mutants, but it is out of such hybridization that newness can emerge" (BBC Interview).⁷

Colonial space hybridized by isolation and alienation of the colonial outsider is tested and contested on the grounds of the historical. "There is a difference between history and the historical"⁸ says Uma Parameswaran. She further explains that "Historical" implies a compendium of data, of dates, names, battles, coups: and other details pertaining to events. In order to comprehend the past and how it relates to the present, "history" entails an interpretation of the historical record. Juliet Gardiner, editor of *What is History Today?* (1988), said that the past is no longer "a jigsaw which will one day be complete"⁹. This is a conversation with the present.

Shame reveals the author's unique brand of reality—one in which he situates the individual in relation to the more significant historical factors that shape the social structure around him—by fusing myth, politics, history, and fantasy. The work unmistakably depicts and shapes postcolonial Pakistan, even if the events and people are arranged in a fable-like manner. Although *shame* has a history, it is a rather shallow one. It makes clear use of metaphors. The author characterizes the book as "a sort of modern fairy tale"¹⁰; it takes place in a place that is not exactly Pakistan. Two nations, one imaginary and the other actual, exist in or near the same space.¹¹ Thirty-seven years after gaining independence from colonial authority, Rushdie describes a "not-quite Pakistan" that would get entangled in the subject-object dialectic forced on people in the Third World.



He said that Pakistanis still saw themselves as objects because they haven't been able to get over the humiliation and stigma attached to them under colonial rule. Shamelessness is the ultimate outcome of this sensation of guilt stemming from one's awareness of "objectivity." Rushdie says, "Humiliate people long enough, and a wildness bursts out of them."¹² According to Rushdie, this cycle of shame that ends in shamelessness, which was started by the humiliation of the aboriginal people under colonial control, continues to this day. The three-generation story revolves on the lives and families of two men: rich playboy Iskander Harappa and renowned general Raza Hyder, who are both modeled by real-life figures Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, the former prime minister of Pakistan, and President Zia-ul-Haq. Their battle for survival, set against the political landscape of their nation, is rooted in recent Pakistani history; Bhutto was overthrown by Zia in a military takeover in 1977 and later put to death.

Rushdie believes that Pakistan's political and social past is very embarrassing since the idea of "objectivity" is ingrained in the country's inhabitants. In a February 1984 *Gentleman* interview with Dilip Fernandez, Rushdie expressed his interest in illustrating how shame is ingrained in "the architecture that the novel describes"¹³ and how Pakistani society was raised in it. This means that the only way to communicate such a traumatic past is via a "fairy tale" or mythic/romantic form. Rushdie claims that such circumstances "would break a writer's heart" for realism.¹⁴ Thus, the historical book turns into a fairy tale, as Shame's narrator explains:

"Well, Well, I mustn't forget I'm only telling a fairy-story. My dictator will be toppled by goblinish, fairy means"¹⁵

But Rushdie asserts that, at least legally and politically, he has always known he is an immigrant. Rushdie states that his self-description as an American is a spatial identity; constructed from the external territory, it has nothing to do with my Whatness, my essence, or being as a person, until the larger dominant culture readjusts itself to accommodate my presence. Rushdie discusses his changed status as an American citizen since August 31, 1975, when he first began living in America as a permanent resident and eventually completed his naturalization process. For the book, it's a contractual agreement for domicile: I am "subjectified" in return for my readiness to acknowledge that I am a citizen of the sovereign country known as the United States of America. However, the territorial persona, which serves as a cover for my identity, is unable to accurately depict the material body, mental existence, and subject/object of my persona. In order to comprehend and elucidate the complexity of the diasporic experience, I will draw upon my own 25 years of experience as well as the idea that Trishanku, the character from the Indian epic Ramayana who went to heaven but had to settle halfway between earth and paradise, is a metaphor for the contemporary expatriate or immigrant living in the crowded global/local space. Additionally, I will investigate the idea of "global geography," which refers to the surface and depth of the individual as an intersection of the global (cultural) and local (material)¹⁶ Rushdie's examination of the expatriate experience clarifies a number of aspects, including the sensation of bereavement, the desire to return, and the difficulty of doing so.

In *Shame*, Rushdie makes use of myth to illustrate how the aboriginal people were and always will be objects in their own eyes, as long as they remain within the circle of shame and the subject-object dialectic. Rushdie introduces his "myth" by calling Omar Khayyam, the legendary figure, a "peripheral hero" who suffered from "a fear that he was living at the edge of the world, so close that he might fall off at any moment" from his early years.¹⁷ The "shameless" act of rebellion by the three sisters against the "shameful" life they were forced to live gave rise to Omar Khayyam. The three Shakil daughters are single and live in a large home under the strict control of their father, who is a bankrupt and traditionalist. Following their father's passing, they throw a lavish party and choose one of the white officers to become a parent.

The birth of Omar Khayyam is itself a fantasy. Of the three mothers, one got pregnant and the other two feigned. The feigning was so perfect that "they began to weigh the same, to feel exhausted at the same moment and to awake together, each morning, as if somebody had rung a bell"¹⁸. They had the pain at the same moment and a baby was born behind closed doors.

Like Tom in Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones*, Omar Khayyam, too, is unaware of his father and real mother. His mothers had taught him at an early age not to feel shame. When he enters school life, he comes to know that he is an illegitimate son of a British officer from one of his mothers. He lives with his mothers for twelve years and then joins the school and the external world for the next six years. He finally leaves them and also his city of birth for higher studies at the age of eighteen. The three moms stood for the three nations that eventually separated from Britain when India gained its independence: Bangladesh (which was once the eastern part of Pakistan), Pakistan, and India. Furthermore, it is evident from Rushdie's portrayal of Omar Khayyam's relationships with his three mothers that these relationships are unhealthy because the women are shown to be narrow-minded, autocratic, and repressive, and because of this, Omar becomes the shameless, marginalized, and constrained creature that he is as a result of their treatment of him:

"He was not free. His roving freedom-of-the-house was only the pseudo-liberty of a z00 animal and his mothers were loving, caring Keepers. His three mothers; who else implanted in his heart the conviction of being a sidelines personality, a watcher from the wings of his own life? He watched them for a dozen years, and yes, it must be said, hated them for their closeness... (their) three-in-oneness...(which) redoubled that sense of exclusion of being, in the midst of objects, out of things."¹⁹

The moment Omar Khayyam Shakil has the opportunity, he flees the isolated world of his moms and the village of Q, where he spent twelve years of his life. But he also carries his mother's shamelessness with him. Because the mothers knew that Omar's



"shameful" beginnings would make him the target of hatred from those in the outside world, they took care to eradicate any honor- and shame-seeking inclinations in their son:

"It was not only shame that his mothers forbade Omar Khayyam to feel: but also embarrassment, discomfiture, decency, modesty, shyness: the sense of having an ordained place in the world..... Can it be doubted that Omar Khayyam... having been barred from feeling shame.... at an early age, continued to be affected by that remarkable ban throughout his later years, yes, long after his escape from his mothers' zone of influence"²⁰

Omar Khayyam Shakil, therefore, represents the shamelessness of the periphery nation and is the embodiment of the inner humiliation of his three moms. Despite being portrayed as the book's protagonist, Omar is not the true hero. The novel's title alludes to the feeling of "Sharam" itself as well as Sufiya Zinobia, an undesired girl child who blushes pathologically and finally becomes the embodiment of shame and the deadly consequences of suppressing it.

"Repression is a seamless garment," the narrator muses. "A society that crushes its women beneath the intolerable burdens of honor and property, which is authoritarian in its social and sexual codes, breeds repressions of other kinds as well."²¹ Rushdie feels that this kind of suppression leads to violence, which is what Sufiya Zinobia embodies. Her parents, particularly her father, have been ashamed of her from the day of her birth. Because Raza Hyder openly rejected the possibility that the female kid may be his because he desired a boy, the daughter feels very ashamed of herself for not being what she is not. Two months after Sufiya Zinobia's birth, she suffers from a brain fever that renders her stupid. When she acknowledges it, her mother Bilquis Hyder cedes her foolish daughter's destiny of becoming a source of embarrassment. "I must accept it: She is my shame. He (Raza) wanted a hero of a son, and I gave him an idiot female instead."²² Salman Rushdie is a fierce advocate for the rights and abilities of women. He outlines the liberties and limitations that women in conventional positions must contend with. His female characters are independent and powerful.

They take over whatever space they are in; even it is as narrow as the single bed on which Sufiya Zinobia sleeps: Of this takeover, the author says: "I had thought, before I began, that what I had on my hands was an almost excessively masculine tale, a saga of sexual rivalry, ambition, power, patronage, betrayal, death, revenge. But the women seem to have taken over, they marched in from the peripheries of the story to demand the inclusion of their own tragedies, histories and comedies... It occurs to me that the women knew precisely what they were up to-that their stories explain, and even subsume, the men's". He goes on to say: "it goes without saying that not all women are crushed by any system, no matter how oppressive. It is commonly, and I believe accurately, said of Pakistan that her women are much more impressive than her men... Their chains, nevertheless, are no fictions."²³

It is noteworthy that Rushdie uses the pronoun 'her' for Pakistan. Pakistan has to be seen as a woman ravaged by an all-male domination.

Omar Khayyam, the supreme avatar of shamelessness, marries Sufiya Zinobia, the incarnation of shame. Later on, when Sufiya develops the beast of shame and she starts violent attacks on people around her. Omar informs her father who wants to kill her. Omar does not like this idea and decides to keep Sufiya chained to avoid dangers to others. At the end of the novel Sufiya escapes. Raza Hyder is shocked to learn that her chained and unconscious Sufiya has escaped, he did not believe that his own daughter, uncared for and unloved, would become his nemesis and ruin him completely.

But Omar Khayyam is proud of Sufiya that she is now free for the first time in her life: "He imagined her proud, proud of her strength, proud of the violence that was making her a legend... she had risen above everything..."²⁴ Like their union, Pakistan or 'Peccavistan' is, for Rushdie, itself an amalgam of shame and shamelessness. As Rushdie explains, "Between shame and shamelessness lies the axis upon which we turn."²⁵

Rushdie wants to emphasize once again as a moralist that shame, no matter where it is suppressed, will eventually resurface as a terrible and destructive force. In the end, Sufiya Zinobia could have been "the collective fantasy of a stifled people, a dream born of their rage."²⁶

The characters of Rushdie's works are, in fact, migrants of their own free choice, forced to create their own identities in opposition to the sometimes completely distinct social identities of others around them. They are successful in releasing themselves symbolically. Overall, Rushdie's skill as a writer shines through the book, giving a great deal of structure to what at first seems to be pandemonium page after page.

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