

The Shamelessness of the Elite and the Fury of the Repressed: A Study of Salman Rushdie's *Shame*

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ABSTRACT

The present article relates how Rushdie blends the personal and political, fictional and realistic strands to portray how shame affects individuals in many forms on many occasions in their lives. Rushdie tries to prove in his inimitable and mesmerizing style that the antonym of shame, in the context of Pakistani politics has been not honour but shamelessness on the part of the elite. The closed and authoritarian society portrayed in the novel has caused suffering and repression of women characters such as Rani, Harappa, Bilquis, Sufiya, and Arjumand who have stooped to conquer, and male protagonists like Iskander Harappa, and Raza Hyder pursued their ambition ruthlessly but ended in ignominy, incarceration and tragic end. Contemporary heroes lack heroic qualities. Democracy in Pakistan has become a football between corrupt politicians and the military. Religion has become an idiom used by both the parties in more belligerent terms when not in power to raise their credentials to be in power as an apt counter force to its big neighbour from whom it was separated. Shamelessness is the power game of the elite at the expense of the people. Honour lies in realizing that democracy means not only the rule by the majority but also the tolerance and equal treatment of the minority, be it religious or national.

KEYWORDS

Salman Rushdie; Shame; Elite; Shamelessness; Equality.

Salman Rushdie's novel *Shame* (originally published in 1983) is an indictment of the corrupt elite that has ruled Pakistan, which has become exclusivist and denied the rights to people in the most shameless manner. His way of telling history is through play on words and a mesmerizing mixture of history and fiction. It is called:

A double satire on a pair of 'conjoined opposites'- the playboy and the puritan, the socialist democrat and the autocratic dictator -who are seen as two sides

of the same coin; a Jekyll and Hyde of the authoritarian politics." (Teverson 136)

Teverson opines:

The heart of Rushdie's writing is the conscious effort to enter into the discourse of Europe and the West, to mix with it, transform it, to make it acknowledge marginalized or suppressed or forgotten histories; an effort that constitutes the primary political force of his work, and that has made him one of the

English language's principal decolonizing writers" (Said qt. in 23)

Teverson also writes that Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* is a historical fiction that draws upon carnivalesque and comic modes whereas *Shame* is more indebted to the Greek and Senecan tragedy and depicts the violent decline of the noble houses and the corruption of court culture that fails to stem the cycles of violence unleashed by the immoral actions of the protagonists (137). He also compares it with Shakespeare's plays *Julius Caesar* and *Macbeth* in terms of the ambition and downfall of the protagonists.

Rushdie blends the personal and political, fictional and realistic strands to portray how illegitimacy of origin could issue shame and affect individuals. Pakistan's shame is its failure to stick to democracy and become a victim of military regimes. For the sake of honour, Greek and Roman heroes such as Achilles, Brutus and Antony died. Shakespeare's Falstaff mocks the notion of honour as a bubble. But in the modern era heroes are rare as survival has given way to honour. The word has given rise to killings of lovers and couples married inter-caste in India. During the partition, there were many instances where the Sikh fathers used to kill their entire families, specific girls to protect the honour of their families and also to avoid brutalities from the enemies as pointed out by Urvashi Butalia in her book *The other side of Silence*.

Illegitimate origin as Shame

The narrator recounts that rapacity has made fortune for the aristocrats and the Defence people in Pakistan. After a while, shame becomes a part of mental furniture and in the "Defence" and it is found in every household and every piece of furniture: ashtray, photo frames on the walls, and blankets on the bed. Shame is "not the exclusive property of the East" as found by the narrator when a diplomat's

wife queries him why Pakistanis didn't get rid of General Zia in the 'usual' way. That was how Zia was eliminated by his rivals native and foreign after he outlived his usefulness when the Soviet Union withdrew from Afghanistan.

Shakil sisters (compared to the three witches in *Macbeth*) cloister themselves after the death of their father Old Shakil, the representative of the aristocratic class who has left them manners and debts as his legacy. The sisters throw a party for the English in the cantonment. To safeguard the secrecy of impregnation of one of them, the three pretend the pregnancy, lock themselves up in their mansion and lead extremely secluded life to avoid shame.

Omar Khayyam, the son of the three sisters grows up "without the benefit of mutilation, barbery or divine approval" (*Shame* 21). He lives with his mothers and servants in the mansion, hardly sees the outside world, and devours books in the library of his grandfather who maintained it as a token of his snobbery. In desperation for freedom from the castle, Khayyam vandalizes the antiques and valuables, "the material legacy of generations of rapaciously acquisitive forebears" which remained after they have been pawned regularly as the price of "self-imposed captivity" by the Shakil sisters (29). Rushdie compares the closed society of Pakistan to a fictional mansion haunted by the past.

Omar Khayyam has at last been allowed to go out to school and is advised to come home with his pride intact. He has been forbidden to feel not only shame but also:

embarrassment, discomfiture, decency, modesty, shyness, the sense of having an ordained place in the world, and other dialects of emotion for which English has no counterparts. (39)

When Khayyam, at last, comes out, a mob taunts him for his illegitimate origin with

words like 'devil's seed'. When a necklace of shoes is thrown at him, it falls on the neck of a religious man called Maulana Dawood who was there to the amusement of Khayyam and others. Rodrigues, the Angrej teacher rescues the boy and is seen as a father figure by the boy who later remembers his childhood, not in love but in hatred.

Shame may issue on many occasions. Farah Zoroaster was the daughter of Mr. Zoroaster (a customs officer) who has been desperate over his lack of earnings and failure to get his daughter educated. Farah's mysterious pregnancy gets her banishment from school, home, and forced marriage with Rodrigues and exit from the town. Omar Khayyam who loves her seeks to mesmerize her, possess her, and even suspects her, suffers disturbance, and claims to understand his mother's voluntary seclusion. When Farah comes back to town Q, many rumours regarding the possible miscarriage or infanticide, lascivious living, separation with Rodrigues, and incest with her father pervade the air leading to her seclusion in shame and self-love.

Why does Rushdie harp on illegitimate impregnation as the cause of shame in closed societies like Pakistan? In open societies such as America single-parent family has come to stay and protection of child's dignity is expected. But in countries like India and Pakistan 'honour' has claimed the lives of innocent children and young couples in love. The old classes do not feel any shame for their antiquated and undemocratic ideas. But the citizens of tomorrow are nipped in the bud. Instead of feeling shame for projecting its interests as the interests of the people, amassing abundant wealth through illegal and immoral means, the West-Pakistani elite has been brazen, wedded to corruption, intolerant of the democratic and nationalistic aspirations of minority

nationalities such as Bengalis of the Eastern Wing.

Writing of history and Rushdie's tryst:

Rushdie doesn't think that history telling is the privilege of the participants only. The narrator in the novel says that the language or nativity of the historian is invoked for criticism.

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? (28)

Rushdie is mainly a fictionist but not a historian of dry facts and he believes in the reality of hybrid identity rather than racial purity that bred Nazism at its worst.

To Rushdie, history writing is not merely a realistic account of what has happened. He mixes fact and fiction to turn out interesting tales. Facts provide background for fiction to soar high in the sky. If a person wants to flee or fly away it is migration, whereas the flight of a part of the land is secession. He writes that the best thing about migrant peoples and seceded nations is their hopefulness. The worst thing is the emptiness of one's luggage which is not physical. "We have floated upwards from history, from memory, from Time." (87) Rushdie yearns for freedom from linear history or realism.

The word Pakistan was born in England and imposed itself on history. It formed a palimpsest on the past which obscures what lies beneath.

To build Pakistan it was necessary to cover up Indian history, to deny that Indian centuries lying lay just beneath the surface of Pakistani Standard Time. The past was rewritten; there was nothing else to be done. (87)

The Mohajirs commandeered the task of rewriting history in Urdu and English. And the later history of the country is a duel between the two layers of time –the

concealed world forcing its way through the imposed history.

Pakistan may be described: as “A failure of the dreaming mind” and “insufficiently imagined” and full of irreconcilable elements and “a miracle that went wrong” (87)

The real-life counterpart of Khayyam, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto was known for his modernity and his clash with General Zia made him a prisoner and he was finally hanged to death. After more than three decades, Bhutto’s daughter Benazir Bhutto became a victim of terrorism that has undermined the democratic fabric of Pakistan and the latter came to be described as a ‘failed state’ like its neighbour Afghanistan.

Many faces of Shame

In the second chapter Rushdie takes up the story of Bilquis. Her father Mahound, the owner of Empire Talkies in Delhi wants to show films catering to both communities. He goes bankrupt when both parties refuse to visit his theatre and he commits suicide in a bomb blast caused by himself. His daughter Bilqis suffers from shame as the blast rips her clothes apart.

Shame comes when the origin is not known. Bariamma is the matriarch of the family into which Bilquis came. The wives in the family are usually met by the husbands during darkness in the dormitory of forty wives. Bilquis has had to tell her story of shame which takes many transformations. The news of the child forthcoming enthralls Raza Hyder to gain victory in the Battle of Ansu but the child is still-born and later Bilquis goes away along with her husband. Rani Harappa witnesses the destruction of her house and the threat of insult to her honour by Little Mir, a cousin of Iskandar Harappa (the fictional counterpart of Bhutto). She phones Bilquis and tells her that it makes her feel too ashamed.

Bilquis’ shame is that she has begotten an idiotic girl child named Zenobia instead of a boy as desired by Raza

Hyder. Her attachment to Mengal has been severed when the latter has been eliminated by Hyder’s men. At a party, Omar Khayyam Shakil remarks that Raza Hyder would have left her for Pinkie Aurangjeb if Iskander Harappa hadn’t snatched her away. When Raza Hyder is informed about it, he challenges anyone who dares dishonour him. Raza Hyder, The Razor-guts, kills an old servant Gulbadan when he innocently goes near him when he has tied his ankle to the stake to prove his honour. He later turns cold towards Bilquis but realizes his political ambition of raising him by becoming an administrator of the region and suppresses the tribal rebellion brutally.

Shame can issue for many reasons. Rushdie contrasts shame not with honour but with shamelessness. Even so-called affairs of honour result in avoidable tragedies. In his chapter on ‘Blushing’ in the third part of the novel *Shame*, Rushdie refers to three incidents—the killing of a Westernized girl Anahita Muhammad or Anna by her father when he suspected her of intimacy with a white boy, the assault on a young girl by some White youth and the burning to death by a young man when he found the truth called energy. The narrator says that all these three incidents have been inside the head of Sufiya Zenobia and come out at an appropriate time.

Shame can issue out of telling a lie, sleeping with a white boy, or getting born with the wrong sex. Shameful things—lies, loose living, disrespect for one’s elders, failure to love one’s national flag, incorrect voting at elections, overeating, extra-marital sex, maltreatment of women, cheating at cards, writing autobiographical novels, throwing away one’s wicket at the crucial time is done rather shamelessly.

Rushdie here hints that there are many things people do in defiance of tradition or surrender to impulse or prejudice or temptation or for financial gain or during

match-fixing. These have to fill them with shame but people do them rather shamelessly. The catalogue is endless but the casualty is an honour.

Raza Hyder's idiotic daughter Zinobia has turned out to be a synonym of shame and an object of censure by her parents who had been disappointed over her birth. Her sister Naveed or good news had no love lost for her fearing the ruining of chances of her marriage.

Omar Shakil, the counterpart of Shakespeare's Falstaff is rejected by Iskander and comes to know about the death of his brother Babar who became a guerilla fighter on the side of the tribals. The issues of honour and shame prove contentious.

The feelings of shame are also associated with sex and intimacy with alien nationals physically and culturally. Modernity is seen as a threat to the traditional culture and pre-marital or extra-marital sex is seen as an inexcusable crime and individuals are butchered for the sake of honour shamelessly. The same theme is taken up by Rushdie in his novel *Shalimar the Clown* who ostracizes his wife for leaving him for an American Ambassador and pursues the latter to wreak his revenge. Shame is seen as a blow to masculinity and murder as a means of restoration of honour. While the Greek and Roman heroes preferred death on the battlefield or suicide, the heroes of the present time choose murder or mayhem to salvage their pride. Rushdie is for life and against the annihilation of others in the name of honour and castigates inhumanity inherent in the act of revengeful torture or murder of those who have transgressed boundaries of family.

Iskander Harappa transforms himself to rise high in the power structure when he comes to know of Hyder's rise. He also advises his daughter Arjumand Harappa (the fictional counterpart of Benazir) to rise above gender which she takes literally and comes to be known as

the Virgin Iron pants. Later on When Arjumand chides her mother over her lack of love for Isky, the latter comments that he was the world champion of shamelessness and she knew him well before he turned into a saint.

Iskander Harappa writes many articles on foreign affairs, appointed foreign minister by the President but later on resigns from his post to float his party Popular Front. Little Mir's son Haroun Harappa has grown up detesting his father, illegal wealth and emulates his uncle Iskander who advised him to mend his ways. Haroun's betrothal to Naveed or Good news, the second daughter of Raza Hyder ends in scandal and shame as Naveed unites with one Captain Talwar Ulhaq on the night before her wedding. Raza Hyder is enraged but at last, convinced by their domestic servant Shahbanou to agree to Naveed's marriage with Talwar. Bilquis who has had to change the name of the bridegroom in an erratum slip to the wedding card turns "as stiff as dishonour as if had been impaled on a tree" (169). Meanwhile, the president is dethroned in a coup. The guests at the wedding were passive and didn't touch food. Sufiya Zinobia, the idiotic and eldest daughter of Raza Hyder feels a hell of shame and her demoniac and cannibalistic rage has all but wrung the neck of Talwar who had to be hospitalized.

Women stoop to conquer

Rushdie depicts the conflict between the men and women in the novel. The women characters stoop to conquer in the end whereas men characters like Iskander Harappa and Raza Hyder rise high to fall ingloriously. Women characters such as Rani Harappa, Arjumand, Zinobia show grit to resist their repression and emerge powerful and wreak their revenge in their way. After the death of Iskander Harappa, Rani and Arjumand are kept under house arrest. Captain Ijazz and other soldiers are assigned the duty of guarding them. Ijazz, a young man gets exasperated.

Later on, he threatens to burn down the all antique furniture and paintings and other valuable goods in the house but Rani remains undaunted and offers to help him. Ijaz carries out his threat but becomes resourceful and begins to show respect toward her. Rani Harappa makes him love her like a mother and hate himself whereas Arjumand plays coquettishly with him and other soldiers causing a commotion in the ranks. When Ijaz corners her about her real intentions and warns her:

Don't think I don't know what you're up to... You millionaire whores. Think you can do anything. In my village a girl would have been stoned for acting like you do, such cheapness, you know what I mean (190).

Arjumand dares him to stone her to death or molest her as he threatened her. At last, she manages to send him to a torture chamber and death.

The narrator tells that his intention of telling a "masculine tale, a saga of sexual rivalry, ambition, power, patronage, betrayal, death, revenge" (173) was overtaken by the female characters who were more certain about their aims and who have come to the centre and turned it into a feminine one. "A society which is authoritarian in its social and sexual codes, which crushes its women beneath their honour and propriety, breeds repressions of another kind as well" (173) and dictators who present a puritanical face to the public and the 'male' and 'female' plots are all different forms of the same concept.

Although not all Pakistani women are oppressed by the system, they are much more impressive than their men and their shackles are real and increasingly heavier. Aijaz Ahmad, commenting on the hopelessness of female characters as represented by Rushdie sees the novel as "a fiction of despair, for there is no room, in such presentation, for the promise of change and transformation" (Teverson 141) Aijaz Ahmad sees parts of the book as

a parody and part as burlesque and criticizes the romanticization of violence by Sufiya and sees a link with misogynist and imperialist myths through the depiction of the image of a freedom fighter as the idiot-terrorist and the image of freedom-seeking woman as a vampire, Amazon, man-eating shrew. He says that despite some cases where women have gone crazy, violent, phobic, or suffer from dementia, more basically they "have survived against very heavy odds, and they have *produced* history" (Ahmad 150) and credits Rushdie's imagination with bleakness of Orwell.

Rushdie brings out the undemocratic nature of democratically elected Prime Minister Iskander Harappa. He names the house of Iskander Mohenjo and Harappa as house names to attach ancient flavour. Mohenjo-Daro and Harappan cultures predate Aryan culture and the author wants to point out the tyranny of the old vis-a-vis modern culture associated with elements of European and American culture. The bitter struggle of Pakistan and even modern India has been to interact with modern culture in a way that would not negate the national cultures of those countries.

In *Shame*, Iskander has come to believe that people love him and those who hate him are his enemies as well as the enemies of people. He has treated foreign journalists who referred to his repression as urchins. He consoles his daughter Arjumand, the lawyer turned the bringer of green revolution and terror of black marketers when she found a gift in her chambers: the lower half of an antique and rusty suit of armour, a pair of satirical metal legs, and across the hollow waist, a padlocked metal belt to mock her sexual rigidity. Rushdie in a humorous passage shows the hollowness of Iskander's democracy who never liked arguments, trusted none, not even ministers, and set up Federal Security Force. He got sheets prepared, dossiers on the corrupt,

conspirators, tax evaders, student sects, dangerous talkers at parties, gays, and traitors, and launched preventive detentions jailing the malcontents. Iskander remarks to a journalist: "Nobody can topple me, not the fat cats, not the Americans, not even you. Who am I? I am the incarnation of people's love." (184)

Rani Harappa goes on weaving eighteen shawls throughout the reign of Iskander showing out his acts of shamelessness- abuse of individuals and power through raising of hands, swearing, hissing torture, and murder of democracy, the passivity, and encouragement by foreign powers, and complicity in the murder of Little Mir that has finally put him on trial culminating in his death. She sends all those shawls to Arjumand to prove that her father has been not a saint or demi-god as imagined by my daughter but something else. Rani Harappa reminds one of the characters of Madame Defarge who has gone on weaving the names of the aristocrats to be executed in Dickens' novel *A Tale of Two Cities*.

Raza Hyder, the new commander-in-chief determines to increase the morale of the army men defeated in the Eastern Wing. He seeks wrestling matches with many of them, gets himself defeated by choice, and gives them the taste of victory. His strategy has united him with others in that "macabre feeling of shame" (203).

Sufiya Zinobia, the daughter of shame struggles throughout her life with noises, voices, and good and bad memories in her head. Her idiocy keeps her away from her husband Omar Khayyam, turns her ayah Shabanou into a substitute wife for Omar and pregnant, and fills her with shame and somnambulistic violence that beheads her molesters, her life chained and drugged in a dungeon, and finally her enigmatic escape. Shame also to Raza Hyder for suggesting the silencing of Sufiya to Omar, his son-in-law, and a doctor.

Rushdie also highlights the hybrid identity of an individual- the mixture of

puritan and epicurean in the fictional characters—Raza Hyder and Iskander Harappa (the counterparts of Zia and Bhutto) in post-independent Pakistan. He takes the two heroes of the French revolution- Danton, and Robespierre and argues that both pleasure and asceticism are not antithetical and it's possible to think of Danpierre and Robeston. Rushdie himself says in an interview regarding the novel *Shame* that the plot is an almost unrelieved tragedy but written in the language of a farce (Sangari qtd. in Teverson 137). Teverson observes:

Tragedy becomes an aspect of Rushdie's political satire, its function being to comment on the moral and political failings of those with power in Pakistan by indicating with a blackly comic effect the shortfall between tragic grandeur and deadly banalities of corrupt uses of power. (Teverson 137)

Rushdie tries to prove that the antonym of shame, in the context of Pakistani politics has been not honour but shamelessness. Democracy in Pakistan has become a football between corrupt politicians and the military. Religion has become an idiom used by both the parties in more aggressive terms when not in power to raise their credentials to be in power as an apt counter force to India. Consequently, democracy has become hostage to the military rulers and the terrorists supported by a lone superpower whenever it suited its purpose. Chomsky, based on reports by *The Washington Post*, refers to the complicity of the U.S. officials towards the drug trafficking by the terrorists like Gulbuddin Hekmatyar and some officials of the Pakistani military establishment (Chomsky 118). In addition, the communal identities bolstered by religious groups have kept the historical hostility intact and with its repercussions on sports. Kashmir has proved an

intractable problem and wars and the nuclear race have affected the relations between India and Pakistan. The genuine shamelessness is the power games of the elite at the expense of the people. Honour lies in comprehending that democracy

means not only the rule by the majority but also the tolerance and equal treatment of the minority, be it religious or national.

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