

The Private and the Public Affect and Effect of Violence

In Rushdie's *Shame*

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Abstract: The catalyst Rushdie created in his novel *Shame* a world of carnivalesque in order to criticize the political system of arborescent forces dominating not only Pakistan but also the third world; he thus emphasizes the urgent need for transcendence and transgression to change these chaotic and hegemonic societies. The intellectual historicises -through his female characters- the scars lying under the skin of every submitted and silenced woman incarcerated within the cobweb of every patriarchal society. In fact, in *Shame*, the protagonists suffer from erasure and psychological violence; they are entrapped within their "shameful" self-exile, submitting to pain and oblivion. Through his main character SufiaZinobia, Rushdie paves the way for an alternative to break the chains of oppression: he proclaims violence as the unique means of purgation.

Salman Rushdie argues: "I am writing a sort of modern fairy-tale. So that's all right. Nobody need get upset" (*Shame* 70). Readers feel from the beginning of the novel that narration is going somewhere there where one has no access.

Shame opens with the patriarchal force of Shakil who imprisons his three daughters Chhuni, Munni and Bunny, three grotesque figures. They were unable to free themselves for the chains of their father, till death does them apart. Shakil dies leaving them ruined; his and their

misfortunes also stand for and refer to Pakistan's bankruptcy. Freed from his presence in their claustrophobic world, the three women engage in a mundane life still within their closed box. But they do not dare to leave their birthplace; they are physically free but still psychologically bound to the way they were raised. They have been taught to be obedient and never get out of the designed way of living. They have been taught to stagnate in their birthplace. Rushdie ironically describes this rigid way of being and thinking: "We know the force of gravity, but not its origins; and to explain why we become attached to our birthplaces we pretend that we are trees and speak of roots. Look under your feet. You will not find gnarled growths sprouting through the soles. Roots, I sometimes think, are a conservative myth, designed to keep us in our places" (*Shame* 86).

They then share a triune maternity and give birth to Omar Khayam, a one more grotesque character. These three caricatured figures symbolise the infertility of this "imagined community"; and though they gave birth, their progenitor is a "bastard" who only inherited oblivion and loss. Omar seems a happy character, he does not have one caring mother, he has three; but this overdose of love is not enough. "He was not free. His roving freedom-of-the-house was only the pseudo-liberty of a zoo animal; and his mothers were his loving, caring keepers" (*Shame* 35). He stands for a nation entrapped within its political system, unable to cope with it.

A family tree is drawn on the first page of the novel in order to make family bonds clear; this tree might also recall previous vanishing historical monarchies. The novel opens with a mysterious and intriguing beginning, Rushdie leave it to his readers' perception and interpretation, "mesieurs, mesdamesfaitesvosjeux" (*Shame* 240)

Shame is a patriarchal novel, where women are submitted and silenced, Rushdie confirms: "I had thought, before I began, that what I had on my hands was an almost excessively masculine tale, a saga of sexual rivalry" (*Shame* 173), then he adds: "a society which is authoritarian in its social and sexual codes, which crushes its women beneath the intolerable burdens of honour and propriety" (*Shame* 173). It is a community, as described by Chhuni, that "makes women feel like to cry and die...but men, it makes them go wild" (*Shame* 39). The writer presents in his book examples of women who suffer from violence and are subjugated by terror: a girl killed by her father to preserve the family's honour, a woman raped and kept silent because she feels ashamed, Iskander's daughter binding her breast in bandages waging war on her feminine self and hiding her femininity to please her father's eagerness of having a son (*Shame* 126). Rushdie exposes these cases of violence to denounce and express his fury towards the shamelessness occurring in this "imagined community" (Anderson) as well as elsewhere all over the world. Salman Rushdie is himself a member of an association defending the right of women exposed to violence in USA.

Since violence is not only physical, the novelist imagined protagonists who suffer from erasure and psychological intimidation. Rani and Bilquis, "two wives are abandoned in their separate exiles, each with a daughter who should have been a son" (*Shame* 104). They embody exiled women whose only crime is not being able to give birth to a boy, an heir, and a victory for their respective husbands, IskanderHarrapa and RazaHyder.

Rani happened to be a queen for a day only when Isky wanted her to appear in public with him for political protocols, otherwise she stays in her exile ingurgitating violence and oblivion and weaving shawls she called "shamelessness of Iskander the Great", "shawls of

international shame” (*Shame* 193). Rushdie expresses sympathy for the character as he states: “Iskander the assassin of possibility, immortalized on a cloth, on which she, the artist, had depicted his victim as a young girl, small, physically frail, internally damaged: she had taken for her model her memory of an idiot,(.....)and the autobiographical shawl, the portrait of the artist as an old crone” (*Shame* 194).

This may be because she represents all the artists in this world who silently transgress and transcend the ghost of the arborescent corrupt forces hanging over their freedom of speech. She silently works on her shawls weaving unspoken words because in her world "there are things that cannot be said. No, it's more than that: there are things that cannot be permitted to be true" (*Shame* 82); but also "because revenge is patient, it awaits its perfect moment?" (*Shame* 144).

Rushdie denounces violence in patriarchal societies that used to put “hudud” (Sara Suleri) and limitations in order not only to silence women but also to silence communities. Violence appears in *Shame* as a ubiquitous theme denouncing the corruption of political system in Peccavistan, the imagined country that stands for Pakistan but also for the third world as a whole. "The novel represents a palimpsest of Pakistani history" (Hart), in fact "the present and the past, the fictive and the factual: the boundaries may frequently be transgressed in postmodern fiction" (Hutcheon 69).

Rushdie also sheds light on the violence and the hypocrisy of Dictators who veil their lies and sham with fallacious religious discourses, aiming at “singularity rather than plurality, religious extremism rather than tolerance, closure of possibilities rather than multiple possibilities” (*Shame* 47). Thus the novelist harshly rejects and opposes the one-man government.

The dictator’s corruption is embodied in the novel in the characters of Iskander Harrapa and RazaHyder; though both are portrayed as ridiculous buffoons, their symbolic representation is tragic rather than farcical. There has been an urgent need for transcendence and transgression to make radical socio-political changes. This chaotic world imagined by Rushdie needed violence to exterminate the evil and to purge.

For this world of carnivalesque, the catalyst Rushdie imagined “the wrong miracle” (*Shame* 89) SufiyaZinobia, daughter of Bilquis and RazaHyder. The author sees in her “a saint, a person who suffers in our stead” (*Shame*141). She is innocent, pure and was able to preserve these qualities just because she is an idiot for according to Rushdie "idiots are, by definition, innocent" (*Shame* 120). She is, in fact, an extended metaphor of Pakistan's shame and shamelessness.

In this black comedy, Sufiya kept transmogrifying and vomiting violence. The violence she incarnates is an anthological vortex; an inescapable issue from the shamelessness dominating this "imagined community". She explodes wherever there is a shame: killing the turkeys in Pinkies's house, violently aggressing TalvarUlhaq and beheading men after raping them. Every time there is shame and shamelessness, Zinobia is there to make justice to the world; justice for the silenced and betrayed women, anger against patriarchal forces reducing women to mere machines and bodies. Iskander's daughter Arjumand thinks with the conviction that "this woman's body...it brings a person nothing but babies, pinches and shame" (*Shame* 107).She is a "wrong miracle" as well, she should have been a son; and she is a victim as well for she is

confined to hide her femininity to please her father who warned her “[I]t's a man's world.... Rise above your gender as you grow. This is no place to be a woman in” (*Shame* 126). Sufiya embodies revenge for all the submitted women in this imagined world, but she also stands for all mentally retarded countries where "democracy had never been more than a bird of passage" (*Shame* 204).

At the end of the novel “the wrong miracle”, SufiyaZinobia surprisingly kills Omar Khayyam her innocent husband, and not Raza her corrupt father. Through such an end, Rushdie underlines that what he hates the most is not the corrupt leaders but rather the guilty victims that his character Omar Khayam represents. According to the writer, silence and oblivion are more dangerous than political sham and corruption.

SufiyaZinobia explodes at the end leaving no room for any kind of alternative for this “imagined community”. The only torch of light that shines within this chaotic world of grotesque and violence is the art of Rani Harrapa: that power to transcend.

"Rushdie's narrative style can be viewed as a tongue-in-cheek use and abuse of numerous literary narrative conventions and theoretical perspectives that include exaggerated reflections of colonial mimicry, unreliable narrators, fairytale motifs, and intertextuality" (Hart). He advocated magic realism to make the reader confused between fantasy and reality. His use of irony and parody were meant to subvert the system from within. "He utilizes an arsenal of storytelling techniques to make violence palatable so that his readers may be more willing to critique the East's and the West's cultures of shame" (Hart). These writing techniques allowed him to harshly criticise the political system of arborescent forces dominating not only Pakistan but the whole third world too. Rushdie's position of the hybrid writer, allowed him to act as a transnational translator, a bridge between the East and the West. The Indian writer satirises history and historicises through satire. His book, *Shame*, "floated upwards from history, from memory, from Time" (*shame* 87)

The notion of violence as the unique alternative to shake and shock, purge and cure from the dirt of patriarchal societies and the corruption of mentally retarded political systems, was used before by Rushdie in a previous book that he wrote when he was much younger entitled “Terminal Report”, where the main character becomes violent whenever exposed to racism. In *Shame* Sufiya is that “alterego”, another reincarnation of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, a dystopian figure, and a radical solution for a radical change. Rushdie continues writing with the same poisonous satire, and dealing with "a past that refuses to be suppressed, that is daily doing battle with the present" (*Shame* 88) for "the past still resists complete human understanding" (Hutcheon 65). He insists that his main goals as an intellectual are "liberty; equality; fraternity" (*Shame* 251), because the "narrative representation -story-telling- is a historical and political act" (Hutcheon 48).

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