

The Representations of Politics in Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* and *Shame* – A Study

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1. Introduction

One of the most vital and consistent themes running through Rushdie's novels is the use of politics on the canvas of history in the matter of scope and treatment of his novels. If we look at the narrative technique of the writer to present the story, Rushdie resorts to subversive methods like the employment of myth and magic realism to yield new insights into the study of the post colonial politicality of different situations. Any analytical approach to his work involves a process of straightening out the recurrent themes which are all interrelated and dependent upon one another. His novels are an amalgamation of political and social satire, internal identity struggle and a reinterpretation of historical events. My aim, in the paper, is to analyze the new paradigms of the post colonial political issues inherent in two of Rushdie's very famous novels "Shame" and "The Satanic Verses".

2. Issues of Politics in 'Shame'

In *Shame*, Salman Rushdie presented his critique of socio-political life in Pakistan. The essence of politics in the novels of Rushdie is generally marked by elements such as class, race, or nation; and he does so by developing a universe of particularities - specific characters, including himself, particular cities, precise periods such as the moment of decolonization and partition. He projected the characters of *Shame* as emblematic representations for Pakistan. Each of the characters in *Shame* is portrayed in some way or the other symbolically reflecting the history or historical period of Pakistan. Many critics have recognized the two male protagonists - Iskander Harappa and Raza Hyder as representing Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and Zia ul-Haq respectively. Bhutto was the powerful and progressive leader coming into power after the civil war in Pakistan. However, a military coup lead by the Islamic fundamentalist Mohammed Zia ul-Haq in 1977 overthrew Bhutto. Bhutto was imprisoned and later hanged with the utmost secrecy, arousing great anxiety and remonstrations in the public as well as in the political scenario of Pakistan. The course of events in *Shame* very well resembles all these happenings. The whole story takes place in a fictional country of Peccuvistan, which of course resembles Pakistan. Harappa's government is corrupt as well as Bhutto's, he is overthrown by Raza Hyder and he is hanged at the end. Raza Hyder is an army general and he turns Peccuvistan into a fundamentalist country, with public stoning to death and where they are fight on if they appear on the street without a covered face, as well as Zia ul-Haq. However, these two characters can also refer to the Pakistani leaders in general, because it seems that in Pakistan there is always a leader, usually a famous general who is related to one of the previous leaders, this leader becomes badly corrupt after a while, so he is overthrown in a bloody coup by another leader. Here, it is wise to have a glimpse of the history of foundation of the country to better understand how

the antagonism of the story's two villains is based on the actual political turmoil of Pakistan.

On July 15, 1947, India was divided into two independent dominions, "to be known respectively as India and Pakistan". The main cause of this partition arose from the religious, communal clash among Muslims, Hindus, and Sikhs. Driven by insecurity and fear, millions of Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs were seen to carry whatever possessions they have to move around from their old homes to the new homes. In *Shame*, Rushdie presents the surrounding countryside of Q. as an infertile land, the estate of the dead father, which the three mothers sold immediately after his death. The infertility of the land suggests the desolate countryside and implies the poverty of the town. Nishapur, the grand home of the three mothers and their son Omar Khayyam, develops into an "infertile and time-eroded labyrinth" after the women lock themselves into the expansive building. A parallel can be drawn between these characters and the era of colonization in Pakistan. The father represents the British Empire, which dominated Pakistan for years, the mothers can be looked as the colonized period, and Omar is the reflection of new, independent Pakistan. The British Empire ended up and left Pakistan with nothing. The desire of the mothers and Omar to get rid of the oppression they were subjected to can be compared to the Pakistani people's dreams of cultural freedom for their next generation. The upbringing of Omar without a father figure rejecting any feeling of shame is very symbolic here. It symbolizes the lack of structure that was left by the sudden departure of the British. Bilquis Kernel is representative of Muslim Pakistan during and after partition. Her father represents the dominant political identity in post-British India, before partition. His acceptance of both the Hindu and Muslim religions precipitates an "apocalypse" that initiates partition and causes Bilquis and Pakistan to lose their "eyebrows of belonging." These people arrive as immigrants to a new land. Bilquis herself is represented in the novel as the "archetypal migrant whose past in India literally disappears in flames" but "whose beautiful naked body is rescued by her future husband, the future president of Pakistan". Now; it is the fate of migrants to be stripped of identity, to stand naked amidst the strangers.

Thus, it can be said that *Shame* is a novel about Pakistan and about the people who ruled Pakistan. Rushdie's employment of mythic mode in *Shame* blends history, myth, politics and fantasy in such a way that it becomes serious and comic at once. Rushdie describes, "A sort of modern fairy tale, the novel is set in a country that is not Rskistan, or not quite." Rushdie describes a 'not-quite Pakistan' even after thirty-seven years of its independence from colonial rule. Rushdie found that the country was caught up in the subject object dialectic imposed on Third World people by a Manichean imperialism. To him, Pakistani people still view themselves as objects because they were unable to shake off the sense of shame and deprecation heaped on them during colonial rule. The political hegemony of the colonial period still exists. This sense of shame results in its converse: shamelessness, represented very well through the projection of the two characters in the novel, Omar and Sufiya. The politics of Post colonialism is more obvious in the novel through ideology, way of thinking and acting

rather than through technique of writing. A few examples may illustrate my belief- There is a passage in the book which says: "The father should be superior and the son, inferior. But now I am low and he, high. An inversion: the parent becomes the child. He is turning me into his son". Symbolically, it can be said that the lines reflect the desires of the persecuted to become persecutors during and after the colonization.

3. Issues of Politics in 'The Satanic Verses'

The issues of politics are inherent in *The Satanic Verses* too. Published in 1988, Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* became one of the most widely known and controversial books in the world. The novel was banned in India and protested across the world for its portrayal of certain sensitive topics such as the portrayal Islamic prophet Muhammad and the infallibility of the Islamic holy book, the Qur'an. After the Iranian Ayatollah Khomeini issued a "fatwa," or Islamic judicial decree, that Rushdie and those involved in the publication of the book be killed, the novel made headline news across the globe and inspired a political or diplomatic crisis between countries, including Britain, India and Pakistan. There has been a lot of controversy regarding the Islam in *The Satanic Verses*. However, religion is not the only hot-button that this novel explores. It also addresses the political mechanism of immigration from East to West – specifically, from India to the United Kingdom. To fully understand the role that immigration plays in the novel, it is necessary to know the political context in which *The Satanic Verses* was written. When Rushdie published *The Satanic Verses* in 1988, the United Kingdom's political climate was far more conservative than it is today. *The Satanic Verses* was written in such a climate of British conservative reaction against immigrants, especially against South Asian ones, who comprise one of the largest minority groups in England.

The novel addresses the politics of racism as an unfortunate but inevitable part of the immigrant experience. Rushdie compares the fall of Chamcha and Farishta and their consequent transformation to a devil and an angel to immigration. A migrant is forced to adjust to a new society and a new world, he frequently faces the politics of racism and discrimination and he is separated from his closest people. Such experience changes a person a lot, it is almost like mutation. This theme is very thinly manifested in several phases of the novel. The chapter of "A City Visible but Unseen", for example, highlights the frustration and rage that many immigrant youths feel in a society that excludes them. The influx of immigrants from India and Africa was a relatively new phenomenon, and this was causing tensions with natives. Although these new British citizens had the same rights and privileges as natives, many felt excluded from English culture. In the novel, these tensions come to a head when the image of Saladin as a goat-man becomes a symbol of immigrant frustration. Although Saladin himself eschews his Indian identity, his experiences illustrate some of the prejudices that 'brown people' experienced as newcomers in England. Although he is a British citizen and has lived there since he was thirteen, the police officers do not believe to be a citizen, and beat him mercilessly. He again experiences racism when he encounters a pamphleteer distributing anti-immigrant materials. It is also embodied in the novel how cultural unrest can engender

violence. When the minorities take the goat-man symbol to support their cause, the police begin to prepare for impending violence, ironically using their own violence to suppress it. Likewise, the mystery of the Granny Killer exacerbates racial tensions, as do Pamela's accusations of witchcraft amongst the police. Thus, the high and dry reality of racial and cultural politics becomes everywhere visible in the novel.

However, to voice forth these issues of racial politics or identity politics, Rushdie continually integrates effect and evidence of globalization. He mentions the social, political and cultural impact the United States exerts on rest of the world. When Saladin had come to England, he not only changed his name to make it pronounceable for the English (his original name being Salahudin Chamchawala) but he changed his face and voice as well to look and sound more English. Moreover, he is highly critical of India and an uncritical admirer of England, who refuses any contact with India and does everything to become as British as possible. That is the effect of globalization on common people. Just as those colonized were subject to the economic systems of the imperial power, migrants are subject to the global cultural, economic and political bullying.

Now this effect of globalization highlights another very important issue of the novel i.e. 'identity politics' which is related with inflexibility and change. Infact, one of the unifying themes of *The Satanic Verses* is newness, or change. It attacks inflexible, pompous orthodoxies and celebrates doubt, questioning, disruption, innovation. People who find themselves excluded or suppressed by dominant groups try by various means to find an effective voice and tools for action to create power and authority for themselves. It is these struggles that are the basic underlying matter of Rushdie's novel. The idea of "center" and "margin" can be applied here in this connection. It can be said that Europe and the U.S. constitute the center and people from nations like Nigeria, Jamaica, and India belong to the periphery. Their voices are said to have been "marginalized," pushed away from the center, forced into the margins. In *The Satanic Verses* Rushdie is seemed to challenge the idea of 'centre' reversing the idea of English/European/white sense of identity. London is projected as an exotic land where people follow strange customs like wiping themselves "with paper only" and eating "bony fish". People of traditional Anglo-Saxon stock are almost entirely absent from the London of *The Satanic Verses*. Instead the city swarms with immigrants: Indians, Bengalis, Pakistanis, Jamaicans, German Jews, etc. He reminds the English that they too were colonized, by the Romans and the Normans. However, the author in the novel takes trouble to show how immigrants gradually create an identity for themselves in England which is richer, newer, more interesting than the traditional stereotypes associated with the old center of empire.

If analyzed carefully, it can be found that there are always two strategies at work to establish the identity on the part of the oppressed or marginalized. One very common strategy to recreate a sense of identity is through re-speaking and reliving their traditional history. Often, it takes the form of referring back to a historical period of suffering, as in the case of African-Americans finding a common ground in their heritage of slavery. In

the novel, the Hindu miners in the Titlipur story who look back to their suffering under Islamic rule to justify their attacks on the Muslim pilgrims illustrate the common phenomenon of historical grievances being used by one group to justify violence against another. Another instance in the novel is the group of Sikh terrorists who blow up the plane at the beginning. The politics of shared grievance generally focuses its attention on the past rather than on the future. Rushdie wants people to remember that Union Carbide's neglect cost the lives and health of thousands of Indians in the Bhopal disaster. However, he does not want the very identity of India to be defined only by a chain of misfortunes. The most important aspect of the Indian cultural heritage for him is its rich, creative variety. Its history is more than a mere list of the crimes committed against it by others; and he is prepared to add the crimes committed by Indians against each other to its portrait as well. Another way to identity politics is to look back to a positive historical heritage instead of a period of suffering. The black Caribbean immigrants in the novel, thus, seek to emphasize an African heritage which is actually very distant from their lived experience. The black leader originally named "Sylvester Roberts" has chosen the absurd name "Uhuru Simba" It is an attempt to "Africanize" his identity.

4. Conclusion

To conclude, it can be said that most of Rushdie's novels are always strongly connected to the history and politics of India and Pakistan although they are fictions. He uses different methods and he treats the facts loosely, interprets them in his own way. The characters and events in his books are fictional but they are very often a transparent allegory of the real events and persons. His novels are metaphor itself to rewrite the history, politics and several critical struggles. The postmodern techniques in his narratives allow him to question the historical and political past and its effect on the present realities.

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