

## Chapter VI

### Shame

Tracing the ideological location of Rushdie within the great prolixity and heterogeneity of cultural production in postcolonial literatures, Aijaz Ahmed in his book entitled In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures (1992) designates Shame as being “of a classic of this counter-canon” of Third World Literature (Ahmad, 1992, 125). Ahmad reminds us that Rushdie has insistently demanded that his three novels, *namely*, Grimus, Shame and Midnight’s Children should be read as “Third World” texts especially due to the following reasons, which Ahmad opines may be regarded as explanatory behind Rushdie’s claim. He states that

Rushdie has underscored whenever he has spoken in his own voice, whether within the novels or in the interviews and conference papers which have inevitably followed:

The colonial determination of our modernity, the conditions and corruptions of post-coloniality, the depiction of the Zia and Bhutto periods in Pakistan as emblematic of Third World candillos and dictators in general, myths of nationhood and independence, the myths and gods of India, Third World migrants in metropolitan cities, the world of Islam and so on (Ahmad, 126).

The uniqueness of Shame lies precisely in an understanding of the implications behind such cross cultural contexts which gives to the novel its peculiar flavour. Ahmad has explained how, for instance,

Rushdie's idea of 'migrancy', for example, which is quite central to his self-representation both in fiction and in life, has come to us in two versions. In the first version, fully present in Shame and in the writings that came at more or less the same time, 'migrancy' is given to us as an ontological condition of all human beings, while the 'migrant' is said to have 'floated upwards from history'. In the second version, articulated more fully in the more recent writings, this myth of ontological unbelonging is replaced by another, larger myth of *excess* of belongings: not what he belongs nowhere, but that he belongs to too many places. This is one kind of thrust in Rushdie's work, which appears to refer to the social condition of the 'Third World' migrant but is replete also with echoes from both the *literary tradition* of High Modernism and the post-structuralist *philosophical positions* (1992, 127).

Without going into too much details over Rushdie's 'philosophical positions' in his later novels, which will be taken up in the later chapters of this thesis, we here note that his fiction, in his early phase has taken up with the individual's loss of freedom in a stifling world of political or

state corruption. Rushdie's fiction delineates the cross cultural contexts within the individual by showing the workings of his freedom, absolute and mythic and which is due to the fact that he belongs "nowhere" since he "belongs everywhere" (1992, 127). But in Shame we find that Rushdie is portraying the "image of the public sphere of politics so replete with violence and corruption that any representation of resistance becomes impossible" (1992, 127). Shame portrays the prevalent political situation in Pakistan today, where the individual has been denied the ambience of freedom. Indeed, as Ahmad points out, that in the Pakistan as portrayed in Shame:

there is no space left for either resistance or its representation; whoever claims to resist is always enmeshed in relations of powers and in the logic of all-embracing violences (1992, 127).

Shame illustrates the tyranny of authoritarian regimes that seek validity in doctrinaire Islam. The narrative centres on the professional rivalry of its two main protagonists Iskander Harappa and Raza Hyder, the former modeled on the personality of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and the later on General Zia Ul Haq, both powerful political leaders in Pakistan until their assassination. Just like the Nehru family in India (Midnight's Children), Shame tells us the story of a small coterie of power-mongers, who create history and control political power. Syed Mujeebuddin in his essay entitled "Centres and Margins" Shame's 'Other' Nation" in Salman

Rushdie: New Critical Insights has drawn our attention to the way in which the centre of power is posited against the marginalised figures of the protagonist Omar Khayyam Shakil and the ladies, especially Sufiya Zinobia, the heroine of the novel, who literally embodies Pakistan itself (2003, 133). However, as Mujeebuddin points out:

there is another figure, the narrator himself, who emphasises his own marginal status and in aligning himself with the other peripheral figures of the novel inaugurates an imaginative coalition between himself and them. In a passage couched in exquisite irony, the narrator conflates himself, his 'hero' Omar Khayyam Shakil and the translatedly popular 'Oriental' figure of Omar Khayyam, who the narrator points out in the text was never very popular in his native Persia but existed in the ... 'in a translation that really is a complete reworking of his verses' (2003, I. 133).

And it is to be noted in this context that Rushdie's narrator steps in to midst of his fiction and declares that just as Khayyam gained recognition in the West in translation, in both terms, that of the letter as well as that of spirit, similarly he has gained fame by being translated in other languages and in other countries. Rushdie states in Shame that

I, too, am a translated man. I *have been borne across*. It is generally believed that something is always lost in

translation; I cling to the notion — and use, in evidence, the success of Fitzgerald — Khayyam — that something can also be gained (Shame, 29).

With respect to the above declaration we perceive the following lessons to be remembered in terms of Rushdie's fiction. Firstly, Rushdie as artist contains within his very persona a symbiotic relationship between various cross cultural currents and which is reflected in his very fictions commencing from Grimus to Fury. Secondly, if an author like Rushdie is translated into several languages, he gains in the process because it opens him to reassessment and interpretation in different cultural contexts.

In this connection Rushdie's later statement in the novel about his younger sister as well as himself acquires significance. He tells his sister that although he has known Pakistan for a long time, he has never lived in the country for more than six months at a stretch. And that his impression about Pakistan has been imbibed by fragments (Shame, 74-75). Here we might question Rushdie's status regarding his adopted country. Rushdie confesses that he had actually gone back to live in Pakistan but had left not because of political difficulty or economic pressure but because he had found the country quite stifling and claustrophobic because of its internal conflicts (Ahmad, 1992, 133). Rushdie's "leave-taking" is not so much fraught with emotion, rather it is central to his public self-representation as well as to the structure of his fictions. It becomes increasingly difficult to locate Rushdie in his fictions. From his position

as an exile from Pakistan, as well as from his birthplace, India, Rushdie becomes the quintessential migrant, to him the frontiers of country and nations become blurred. Reality and fantasy intermix. Magpie realism pervades the landscape created by Rushdie, whether it is India or Pakistan. With reference to Shame, Rushdie writes:

The country in his story is not Pakistan, or not quite there are two countries, real and fictional occupying the same space, or almost the same space. My story, my fictional country exists, like myself, at a slight angle to reality. I have found this off-centring to be necessary; but its value is, of course, open to debate. My view is that I am not writing only about Pakistan. I have not given the country a name (Shame, 29).

Aijaz Ahmad in his In Theory has compared Rushdie's self-exile with that of James and Conrad, Pound and Eliot, Picasso and Dali, Joyce, Gertrude Stein and so on. All of these artists and authors

experienced the same kind of 'suffocation' in their own spaces of this globe, and were subsequently to leave behind immense resources of genre and vocabulary for delineating that predominant image of the modern artist who lives as a literal stranger in a foreign and impersonal city and who, on the one hand, uses the condition of exile as the basic metaphor for modernity and even for the

human condition itself, while, on the other, writing obviously, copiously, of that very land which had been declared 'suffocating' (Ahmad, 1992, 134).

What is even more interesting to note is that Rushdie has located his temperament and status of exile in cross cultural contexts. If his sense of dislocation in a foreign culture may be powerful, it is equally well balanced by his honeymoon with cultures, other than his. In Rushdie's works, his feeling of loss and angst is always compensated by his belonging to a new culture. In other words, Rushdie himself becomes a site of contesting cultures where nothing is negated but forever assimilated in new forms of permutation and combination. It is in Shame that we find for the first time (and what will be amplified in his later novels),

What is new, and decidedly postmodernist...the emphasis...on the productivity, rather than the pain, of dislocating oneself from one's original community, as well as the idea, made much sharper in Rushdie's more recent writings, of multiple belongings (Ahmad, 1992, 134).

When Rushdie speaks of both Shame and Midnight's Children as novels of "leavetaking", he actually implies a parting not from countries of the East but a separation from the country of his birth (India) as well as from his adopted country (Pakistan). Rushdie, in his act of translation from country to country in and in his bearing himself across cultures does

actually manifest spells of indecisiveness. In other words, Rushdie is actually engaged in forging in the smithy of his soul, what it means to be an exile in a foreign country and what implications it may have on his heart and mind. Shame is a unique novel because in it Rushdie

seems forever to be taking back with one hand what he had given with the other: the will to take leave is poised against the impossibility of leavetaking; he has been coming loose but is still 'joined', he is still joined but only by 'elastic' bonds, and he is not sure that he likes the fact of continued joining...he makes statements, but he does not believe in them; the fictive and the real coexist but do not correspond; not only his text but he, himself, exists 'at a slight angle to reality'; not his text but he is 'translated', 'borne across'; the translation occurs not on the semantic but on the existential level. These ambivalences propel him, then, to write 'a novel of leavetaking', about a country which is 'not quite Pakistan' and 'not only Pakistan' but is, in the most obvious ways, Pakistan (Ahmad, 1992, 135).

For one thing, we have to accept Rushdie's monumental ambivalence about the culture of his origins as well as his activist and antagonistic relations with British culture. And the same things may well be said about his relationship with the United States in Fury. It is also

undeniable that Rushdie comes to realise in the course of his fictions that self-exile rarely becomes a full naturalization even when class and culture can be fully shared. For example, British racism forecloses the option for people of colour, no matter from which part of the world they may be from. On another level the fragmentary character of the migrant artist accounts for much of Rushdie's ambivalent attitude towards both his homeland and his adopted country. Here, we have to concede that Rushdie is only partly true to himself when he declares that he has learned to appreciate Pakistan by slices and must therefore reconcile himself to the inevitability of the missing pieces, thus reflecting both the known and the unknown in fragments of cracked mirrors. In Midnight's Children Rushdie duplicates this perception of experience by way of fragments when he narrates how his grandfather came to love his future wife through a perforated bedsheet.

The narrativisation of life in terms of "slices" is very much there in Shame as well as Midnight's Children. This problem has been analysed by Aijaz Ahmad in the context of modernism and post-modernism, which both argue for "views of the world which would serve to validate further the ontological primacy of the fragment" (Ahmad, 1992, 138). According to Ahmad, the issue cannot be regarded as one which begs for a formal resolution because no one can claim that he is in a position to know both India and Pakistan in their entirety. And this is because of the hybrid composition of the subcontinent, where several religions and racial

sentiments intermix to produce a complicated intersection of cultural cross currents.

It is at least arguable that no one ever knows their country whole, regardless of how much of their life is or is not actually lived within his borders; that the imaginative apprehension of totality is always constructed on the basis of those bits and slices of concrete experience which constitute any individual's life, migrant or not; that what eventually matters about any experience, felt or narrated, is not its partiality, because direct experience is always partial, but the quality of the particular 'bits' which constitute it and those others which remain outside the felt experience and therefore outside one's imaginative capacity as well (Ahmad, 1992, 138).

It is because of this hybrid character of the culture of the subcontinent that Rushdie uses the metaphor of the palimpsest to illustrate the superimposition of one racial instinct over and against another and which equally amplifies and qualifies his approach to the fragmentary nature of experience. For example, Rushdie brings together historical and literary motifs in the design of Rami Harappa's shawls in Shame. Shame's metaphors and images, which are sometimes expressed through conceits, function as palimpsests and signify a dynamic hybridity that is brazen and polemic in its politics, as against the "palimpsest" of Pakistan itself that expressly obscure "what lies beneath" (Shame, 87). Syed Mujeebuddin in "Centres and Margins: Shame's 'other' nation" shows

how in the palimpsest of the shawl, “the West as history and the East as literature are pressed into service to severely, indict the corrupt power politics of ruling-class Pakistan (Mittapalli *et al.*, 2003, I. 143). The most interesting innovation of Rushdie in Shame consists in amplifying the inter-textuality of his conceits through the intricate embroidery of the shawls, especially as it is based on such actual historical events like the history of England — the Bayeux Tapestry depicting William the Conqueror’s conquest of England. Thus, the Rami’s gift of “epitaph of wool” for Iskander recalls the so-called “Tapestry” attributed traditionally to Queen Matilda, wife of William the Conqueror, and her hand-maidens. Mujeebuddin comments that:

However, in the context of Rami’s exile condition and near-abandoned status, more important is the ironic evocation of a devoted Queen’s proud tribute to her ‘Lord and Master’s’ glorious conquest. For what is depicted in Rami’s embodiment testimony is not the grandeur of a majestic personality but the ‘truth’ of Iskander’s lust for power that masquerades as love for his people, and his insatiable pleasure-seeking ways hidden behind his “servant of Duty” (192) façade. Appropriately given the title, “The shamelessness of Iskander the Great” (191), the embroidered shawls stand witness to everything that

Arjumand, blinded by her love for her father, refuses to see — a saga of lust, revenge and terror, replete with blood and gore. Thus, Rami's account of the 'life and times' of Iskander Harappa constitutes unlike the Bayeux Tapestry, an alternative version of official and elite history (Mittapalli *et al.*, 2003, I. 141).

Mujeebuddin's comment makes us aware that Rushdie plays upon our sense of official history (both in Shame as well as in Midnight's Children) by showing how historical accounts mask the gruesome reality underlying it. Often, Rushdie's version of history actually implies an act of subversion, not of historical facts but actually of our sense of it, in terms of parody, burlesque and sometimes through the metaphor of the palimpsest. Seen in these terms, the Rami's account of Iskander's history may be termed a defiant act of subversion because she is always seen to retrieve her own self from "the mothballs of the past" and "the fine mist of oblivion" that Iskander had consigned her life into (Shame, 191, 194). Again, the motifs on the embroidered shawls may be seen to exemplify their inter-textual debt to Faiz Ahmad Faiz's famous *ghazal*, "Do not Ask of Me, My Love", a poem that Rushdie quotes in The Satanic Verses:

Do not ask of me, my love,  
 that love I once had for you....

How lovely you are still, my love,  
 but I am helpless too;  
 for the world has other sorrows than love,  
 and other pleasures too.

Do not ask of me, my love,  
 that love I once had for you (S.V., 334-335).

Just as the context of the poem, quoted in The Satanic Verses underlies the terrible irony of loving, similarly within the ambience of Shame, the elitist history woven on the shawls of the Rami, hides the misery which numerous people have suffered from time immemorial. Thus, if Faiz's bringing together of the images of velvety luxuriousness and that of the corruption and decay of human flesh forcefully highlights the limitations of conventional history, similarly Rami Harappa's shawl focus on those aspects of great men's lives conveniently excluded in official versions of history. In this way Rami offers us an alternative view for each projected virtue of Iskander (Mittapalli *et al.*, 2003, I. 142).

Shame then becomes emblematic of an emotion which runs across nations, societies and histories. Through this motif Rushdie asserts the complex feelings of Shame and guilt in cross cultural contexts. For example, the juxtaposition of the dynamic and the placid, the active and

the passive in Sufiya Zinobia's name also becomes evident in Rushdie's discussion of the other "ghosts" that 'haunt' Sufiya's story:

The British Pakistani girl, who was killed by her father because she had shamed him by making love to an English boy, the unnamed 'Asian' girl, who was beaten up on the underground by a gang of white teenaged boys, and the boy who had, impossibly, 'ignited of his own accord' (117) and burned himself to death. The narrator here delineates the predicament of people caught in situations where they are either the victims of other people's shame, as exemplified by the story of the Pakistani girl, or, are themselves mortified by their situations, as typified by the case of the unnamed girl (Mittapalli *et al.*, 2003: I. 145).

Rushdie's images of shame have a referentiality which not only reach out to other texts of his, but also to other nations, histories and cultures. It is this heterogeneity in a culture branded as hybrid, which leads us to transcend national parameters as well as religions and cultures. Speaking of Pakistan, Rushdie often slips into the neighbouring country as well as to Britain. In this sense the shame suffered by the Pakistani girl is not only individual but universal (Shame: 117). Similarly, the burning boy's case connects the humiliation suffered by coloured people in a metropolitan society with the keen sense of shame inflicted on woman in

traditional societies (Shame, 117). In this manner Rushdie slips in and out of narratives, continents and history to illustrate instances of shame, which is productive of cultural distortions as well as that of racial antagonism. Rushdie, therefore, places his characters in the dialectic of culture, civilisation and contesting historical periods, from where they emerge to underline their individuality as well as universality. Pakistan, then, is a real, historical and political entity but it simultaneously belongs to the realm of the author's imagination, where it transcends the limitations of time and space.