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Magic Realism in Salman Rushdie's *Shame*

Dr. Nabarun Ghosh

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Jagjiwan College, Veer Kunwar Singh University, Ara, Bhojpur, Bihar, India

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***Abstract*— Salman Rushdie's works often blend fact and fiction in a masterful way. By doing so, Rushdie's magical realist texts present the contradictions of contemporary India and Indianness. Rushdie's status as an immigrant to Britain but writing about the Indian sub-continent allows him to posit himself as both an 'insider' and an 'outsider' of both cultures. Rushdie's hybrid identity as an Indian, now migrated to Britain, very well suits the technique of magic realism in order to raise voice for those who are marginalized because of their language, religion, caste, gender and nationality. This research paper attempts to analyze Salman Rushdie's use of magic realist technique in his novel Shame. By using this technique, Rushdie successfully blurs the boundary between fact and fiction. This technique enables him to question the dominance of patriarchy, corruption and power and at the same time put a resistance to them. There are several magical elements in the novel which make it incredible. But, the setting of the novel strongly resembles modern-day Pakistan. Thus, the blending of magic and history makes the novel a true example of magic realist novel.*

***Keywords*— magic realism, history, fantastic, myth**

What is Magic Realism

The term 'magic realism' designates a mode of expression in which the realistic and the fantastic elements mingle together. In magic realist fictions magical things happen in a world of quotidian reality. And these inexplicable occurrences are treated by the writer as real as eating, drinking and other daily activities. Although the technique of magic realism is quite discernible in the earlier literary works like the 17th century work *Don Quixote* (1605) by Miguel de Cervantes, the early 20th century story "The Metamorphosis" (1915) by Franz Kafka etc., the Latin American authors like Jorge Luis Borges, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Italo Calvino and others practiced it as a deliberate self-conscious technique. Other important writers of magic realism include Salman Rushdie, Toni Morrison, John Fowles, Gunter Grass, Angela Carter, Maxine Hong Kingston, Ben Okri, Andre Brink et al. They have incorporated the technique of magic realism in order to represent the world and life in which magic and realism coexist and are felt and experienced by marginalized communities.

Magic Realism in the Novels of Salman Rushdie

In Salman Rushdie's novels there are many instances where magical elements are merged with contemporary historical and socio-cultural realities. He deliberately used magic realist mode in order to depict the realities where magic occupies a significant position. Most of his novels are set in India where people believe in magic as naturally as they believe in history. Therefore, magic realism appropriately presents Indian people and their beliefs.

Rushdie's first use of magic realism occurs in his second novel *Midnight's Children*. Although in his first novel *Grimus* there are some magical elements, it does not qualify as a magic realist novel because of its fantastic setting. Rushdie himself, along with several other literary critics, has vigorously criticized this novel because of its escape from reality.

> Rushdie [. . .] has spurned the first flowering of his talent as a work of artistic and intellectual cowardice. 'The thing that I disliked about my first novel' he told Rani Dharker in an interview in 1983, 'was that it's a complete fantasy. It's not

placed in a real place, some imaginary island [...]. (Teverson, 2010: 121)

However, this science fictional novel forms a ground beneath his feet which allows him to experiment on the sister technique of magic realism in the later part of his career. Interestingly, the very first lines of his next novel *Midnight's Children* suggest his rejection of the science fiction mode.I was born in the city of Bombay…once upon a time. No, that won't do, there is no getting away from the date: I was born in Doctor Narlikar's Nursing Home on August 15th, 1947. (Rushdie, 2008: 03)

Magic Realism in *Shame*

Shame presents an account of events in an unnamed country that strongly resembles Pakistan. The story of the novel circulates around three families, the Shakils, the Hyders and the Harappas, and around the love, hatred, rebellion, shame and shamelessness of their family members. The novel's storyline spans three generations and centres on the lives and families of two men—Raza Hyder, a celebrated general, and Iskander Harappa, a millionaire playboy. Their life-and-death struggle, played out against the political backdrop of their country, is based on the real life of Pakistani President Zia ul-Haq and former Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, who was deposed by Zia in 1977 and executed. Besides the so-called "political facts" of Pakistan's recent history, *Shame* also blends history, myth, everyday news, and fantasy which is at once serious and fairy-tale-like. "A sort of modern fairytale" (Rushdie, 1995: 70), as the author describes it, the novel is set in a country that "is not Pakistan, or not quite" (29); and it explores such issues as the uses and abuses of power and the relationship between shame and violence. On the one hand, Rushdie seems to try to depict a realistic world in *Shame* with accurate accounts of political revolutions. On the other hand, he builds the structure of *Shame* with fabulous figures (the three mothers, Sufiya), mythical locations (Nishapur, the Impossible Mountains), grotesque characteristics of the protagonists (Sufiya's blushes, Raza's bruises), and even metamorphoses of the characters (Sufiya's white panther and Babar's angel).

In order to make his reader acquainted with the "strangeness" and heterogeneity of his characters and the story, Rushdie weaves the fairy-tale-like elements and the everyday reality together. This juxtaposition magnifies the eccentricity of the events and characters in his novel, constantly reminding the reader of the conflicts in the story. In the text, the supernatural phenomenon is treated as "normal" and "real" by Rushdie or by the characters in the story.

The setting of the novel, i.e., Nishapur is located in the middle of Q, which is supposed to be a prosperous city filled with heavy business and a large number of inhabitants day and night. Nishapur is a magnificent mansion, which has been owned by the Shakils for generations. This is a realistic building where the Shakils live their lives. Because of this strong connection between the mansion and the family members, Nishapur functions as a psychological reflection of the family members. However, things start becoming complicated when old Shakil dies and the three sisters, Chhunni, Munnee and Bunny, decide to hold a party. Violating the Muslim laws and the conservative social regulations, the sisters invite the Western sahibs to participate in drinking and dancing at the party. One of the sisters even makes love with a white sahib and gives birth to Omar Khayyam. Suffering from the shame of having a baby outside of marriage, the three sisters lock themselves in Nishapur forever. The sisters refuse to talk about the shame of their lust and pretend to ignore their sin by sharing their pregnancy. Though they refuse to face their shame, their spiritual suffering is also revealed through the building. It is depicted as an infinite place where there is no movement of time and no changes. Even though the mansion is located in the downtown, it is isolated from the ordinary life. This "hesitation" between the busy downtown and the spiritually isolated mansion amplifies the withdrawal of the three sisters from the society and the idleness of their minds. Moreover, Nishapur has become the image of the three sisters' mental condition. Omar Khayyam regards Nishapur as a "third world that was neither materialistic nor spiritual, but a sort of concentrated decrepitude made up of the decomposing remnants of those two more familiar types of cosmos" (30).

Shame revalues the postcolonial metaphor of marginality in the figure of Omar Khayyam, who as a child suffers from "the fear that he was living at the edge of the world, so close that he might fall off at any moment", and even after being successfully integrated into society is "sometimes plagued by that improbable vertigo, the sense of being a creature on the edge: a peripheral man" (21 and 24). In this choice of phrasing, the text shrewdly invokes contemporary theory and its vocabulary of margin and centre. The fact that the world has to be thought of as flat in order to even entertain the notion of living on or speaking from the edge only emphasizing how backward and artificial the unfortunately very real social division into margin and centre is.

In Omar's mind, Nishapur turns out to be a wasteland of his mind, a prison of his body, a call of death from his family history. Nishapur functions as a fantastic place which Omar Khayyam tries to escape but in which he is imprisoned. Moreover, Nishapur is mythologized in Omar's mind as a labyrinth, which is used to imprison the forbidden child, the hybrid. "Omar dreamed of exits, feeling that in the claustrophobia of 'Nishapur' his very life was at stake. He was, after all, something new in that infertile and time-eroded labyrinth" (30).

Besides Nishapur, there is another fantastic place that is inserted in the empirical setting of the novel—the Impossible Mountains. Unlike Nishapur, the Impossible Mountains do not transform from an empirical realistic object to a fantastic one. The specific status of the Impossible Mountains comes from that it is all over a fantastic locale misplaced in the realistic world. The name "Impossible Mountains" itself is very fairy-tale-like, and ironically, many magical happenings seem to be "possible" in this mountainous area. In the Impossible Mountains, Rushdie observes, "you will not find that name in your atlases, no matter how large-scale" (23). Rushdie probes that these mountains do not exist in the real world because they cannot be found in the atlas; however, the mountains lie near the town Q and are detected by Omar Khayyam through his telescope, so the Impossible Mountains do exist in the world of *Shame*. This ambiguity suggests that the definitions between the possible and the impossible can be re-examined. In the Impossible Mountains, the impossible things will be possible. As Nishapur is the reflection of Omar Khayyam's mind, the Impossible Mountains are the place of salvation for Babar Shakil.

On the one hand, the Impossible Mountains are the place filled with legends and miracles; on the other, the mountains are abundant with oil wells and military conflicts. On the realistic way, the mountains are the place of death and blood; on the fantastic way, they are the place of Babar's pleasure and salvation. As the second son of the three mothers without knowing who the father is, Babar also suffers the same shame as Omar Khayyam does. Finally, Babar decides to leave Nishapur and to go to the Impossible Mountains to join the guerrillas. From the guerrillas, he hears of a story of the angels, the earthquakes, and subterranean Paradises. In the Impossible Mountains, he learns, things are inverted. Heaven is underground and when earthquakes occur, angels will come out of fissures in the ground. In this place of legends and fairytales, all things are impossible and against the common sense. It is also the place where the earthly shame can be inverted. In this fairyland, the mundane values will be forsaken. That means Babar will not be judged as shameful just because he does not know who his father is. In these mountains, Babar gets rid of the earthly shame and is transformed from a mortal into an Angel (132). In the mountains, Babar gets his salvation: "The earthquake, Babar Shakil wrote in this notebook, shook something loose inside me. A minor tremor, but maybe it also shook something into the place" (129). In these mythical Mountains, the empirical realities happen like the militant conflicts and the death of Babar; however, the fantastic things also occur there. The fantastic metamorphosis of the gold angel still projects the hidden pureness in Babar's soul, which cannot be convinced in the empirical world in the novel.

Besides these mythical locales, Rushdie also narrates several mythical characters or characters with fantastic characteristics to magnify the hidden shame which they dare not to speak out, or which they try to neglect in their minds. Through the mythologization of fantastic metamorphosis, the hidden truth is revealed and enlarged. For example, the three Shakil sisters, Chhunni, Munnee and Bunny, seem like fairy-tale-like characters because of their caricatured names and their mysterious trinity. "…there once lived three lovely, and loving sisters. Their names…but their real names were never used…" (11). The tone the narrator uses to describe the sisters is like the tone used to tell a fairy tale. But the three sisters are still like normal characters thus far. When one of the sisters (no one knows which) discovers that she is pregnant after the party, they withdraw from society and seclude themselves in Nishapur. They know that they are bankrupt and they will not have any respectable status in the society. What is more, one of the sisters is pregnant with a white sahib. What a shame it is! However, the sisters never reveal which sister has committed the crime and they even refuse to talk about the shame. They deny the shame by sharing the characteristics of pregnancy:

> Now the three of them began, simultaneously, to thicken at the waist and in the breast; when one was sick in the morning, the other two began to puke in such perfectly synchronized sympathy that it was impossible to tell which stomach had heaved first. Identically, their wombs ballooned towards the pregnancy's full term. It is naturally possible that all this was achieved with the help of physical contrivances, cushions and padding and even faint-inducing vapours; but it is my unshakeable opinion that such an analysis grossly demeans the love that existed between the sisters. In spite of biological improbability, I am prepared to swear that so wholeheartedly did they wish to share the motherhood of their sibling—to transform the public shame of unwedlocked conception into the private triumph of the longed-for group baby—that, in short, twin phantom pregnancies accompanied the real one; while the simultaneity of their behavior suggests the operation of some form of communal mind. (20)

They try to delete any individual characteristics and become "one" person. Quite magically, they speak, sleep, and even think the same way at the same time. Their individuality disappears, mythologizing as a "trinity". This trinity presents their refusal to accept the mundane judgment and their denial to accept their shame. However, this trinity of their physical phenomenon also projects their hidden fear of shame. When the incarnation of their shame—Omar Khayyam decides to leave and to live in the empirical world outside Nishapur, the shame can't be hidden in their denial any more. The mythical trinity starts to decompose and disappears finally. They have to return to the real world without hiding in the fantastic world.

Another mythical figure is the novel's heroine, Sufiya Zinobia Shakil, who has been described by her mother as the personification of shame itself. Although Sufiya is a realistic character, she is treated as a mythical figure by Bilquis. Sufiya grows up in shame, already blushing at the moment after her birth because her father tries to disown her for not being the male heir he wanted. As a result of a brain fever, Sufiya grows up mental-retarded incapable of expressing her own ideas and attitudes. Later, as she absorbs the unfelt shame of others, Sufiya's blushes take on such intensity that they boil her bath water and burn the lips of those who kiss her. All of these specific characteristics show that Sufiya does not live as an individual identity; she just reflects other people's shame. Sufiya is thus not like a realistic figure but a "vessel" to receive the shame of her family members and the shame of the country (286).This emphasis on Sufiya as an incarnation of shame gradually transforms her from a human being into a mythical figure. With the increase of shame received from other people, she cannot take the burden as a vessel any more. She can't control the flames of shame and loses her own consciousness of Sufiya Zinobia Hyder. Finally, she becomes a ravening beast possessed and driven by her shame, taking to slaughtering human beings by tearing off their heads.Rushdie describes Sufiya as a "beast inside the beauty — the opposing elements of a fairy-tale combined in a single character" (139). Sufiya no longer exists as a person but as a concept finally. She is the symbol of shame and the beast lived in the beauty, but not the girl Sufiya in her parents' mind, or in Rshdie's narration.

> Lurking inside Sufiya Zinobia there was a beast. We have already seen something of the growth of this unspeakable monster; we have seen how, feeding on certain emotions, it took possession of the girl from time to time. (197)

When she escapes from that her parents' house, she leaves "a hole in the bricked-up window. It had a head, arms, legs" (239). At the end of the novel, she returns in the form of a white panther to topple her father's regime and destroy her shameless husband with the heat of her rage. Again, Sufiya transforms from a human to a white panther—not a human being, but a mythical animal. She finally disappears into the wildness, becoming a legend whispered in the wind.

> She was not caught, nor killed, nor seen again in the part of the country. It was as if her hunger had been satisfied; or as though she had never been more than a rumour, a chimarea, the collective fantasy of a stifled people, a dream born of their rage; or even as if, sensing a change in the order of the world, she had retreated, and was prepared to wait a little longer, in that fifteenth century, for her time. (263)

Even at the end of the story, her appearance is also treated as a legend. Sufiya is spoken of as a revengeful tool of the acceptable shame of her family, or of the scandals of the country caused by her father Raza. She is an alternative being living between the realistic and the fantastic worlds. Her movement toward the fantastic world just shows that her existence is possessed by shame and rage gradually. The more fantastic she is, the more enormous the shame is. Moreover, the fabulation suggests the hidden truth that cannot be found in the real world of the novel. Even the mythification of the characters is also the reflections of their mental states. Moreover, Sufiya is also represented as a freakish and comes later to embody a hyper-sexualized exotic woman: she is overcome with "a fire beneath the skin, so that she began to flame all over, a golden blaze that dimmed the rouge on her cheeks and the paint on her fingers and toes" (170). Here she exaggeratedly embodies the image of the Orientalized woman, and her passion flames out of control; however, her unusual exotic flames lead her to destroy certain phallocentric containment narratives as she takes to amputating men's heads, pulling off their neck by some immense force. This magic realist transformation provides her an oppositional space that functions as an alternative to the strict system to which most characters, especially female, are confined.

In the novel, the male characters try to emphasize their dominance over the women in their lives and over the feminine in general. Rushdie laments this treatment, saying that repression is a seamless garment; a society which is authoritarian in its social and sexual codes, which crushes its women beneath the intolerable burdens of honour and propriety, breeds repressions of other kinds as well. By destabilizing the identities of these characters of Chhunni, Munnee, Bunny and Sufia, Rushdie shows that all identities, whether national or personal, are variable and flexible, not rigidly pure or singular. Ultimately, as Rushdie shows in *Shame*, the true nature of things will show through, no matter how hard one works to cover it up. The monster within Sufiya hunts down and destroys the men who had leaders of the nation.

CONCLUSION

Rushdie finds conventional narrative norms to fail in the face of this shattered reality. *Shame* not only presents a world out of joint, but picks up even more specifically on the notion of reality outstripping even the most gifted writer's imagination. The novel uses metafictional commentary to identify real-world Pakistan as a place far more outrageous and incredible even than its fictional analogue. Inverting the realist convention that defines the real as the probable and reasonable, the narrator paradoxically suggests that, the less believable something seems, the more likely it is actually to exist. He ironically describes his almost but not quite Pakistan as "Al-Lah's new country: two chunks of land a thousand miles apart. A country so improbable it could almost exist" (61), thereby effectively characterizing the historical situation after Partition as absurd. Time and again, he counts himself lucky to be "only telling a sort of modern fairy-tale", for if he were indeed aiming at a true-to-life picture of Pakistan, he would have to include an enormous amount of material that would patently violate not only realism's stipulations of what is real, but also those of the Pakistani government, causing his novel to be banned (70). The narrator adequately manages to convey how much more fantastic than his "fairy-story" (71) a halfway accurate account would be by enumerating some of the things he fortunately will not have to mention, thereby mentioning them:

> But suppose this were a realistic novel! Just think what else I might have to put in. The business, for instance, of the illegal installation, by the richest inhabitants of "Defence", of covert, subterranean water pumps that steal the water from their neighbours' mains – so that you can always tell the people with the most pull by the greenness of their lawns (such clues are not confined to the cantonment of Q.). – And would I also have to describe the Sind Club in Karachi, where there is still a sign reading "Women and Dogs Not Allowed Beyond This Point"? Or to analyse the subtle logic of an industrial programme that builds nuclear reactors but cannot develop a refrigerator? O dear – and the school text-books which say, "England is not an agricultural country", and the teacher who once docked two marks from my youngest sister's geography essay because it differed at two points from the exact wording of this same text book ... how awkward, dear reader, all this could turn out to be. (69)

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