

The Inheritance of a Lost Paradise: A Re-Evaluation of Salman Rushdie's *Shalimar The Clown*

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Abstract— This research paper critically examines Salman Rushdie's novel *Shalimar the Clown* from a postcolonial, historical and allegorical perspective. It looks at a key issue in the work: the loss of the Paradise that was Kashmir and the implications and consequences of that loss. The novel is a combination of fiction, history, magic realism and allegory. It looks at the terrible tragedy of Kashmir through the powerfully drawn characters of Boonyi, Shalimar, Max and India. The characters reflect the fates of their nations. They are doomed to self-destruct. Their inheritance is an inheritance of pain and loss. *Shalimar* is Rushdie's tribute to a lost homeland which has been destroyed by violence. The destruction of Kashmir lies at the heart of this passionately written novel. Shalimar's original profession as a tightrope artiste comes a full circle when he becomes the member of an international terror organization. Walking the tightrope becomes the ultimate symbol and a metaphor for history. *Shalimar the Clown* analyzes the roots of violence and connects it to the divisions and conflicts caused in the world by neo imperialism and terrorism.

Keywords— Postcolonial, magic realism, allegory, inheritance, neo imperialism, terrorism.

I. INTRODUCTION

Salman Rushdie has achieved the recognition of being one of the most powerful postcolonial novelists of the twentieth century. His work is a combination of various genres: history, fantasy, allegory, mythology, fable and oral tradition. His first novel *Grimus* was published in 1975. His second novel *Midnight's Children*, which was published in 1981, won him international acclaim. It won the Booker prize for fiction and in 1993, it won him the Booker of Bookers, the best novel to have won the Booker prize for fiction in the twenty five years of the history of the award. The novel is a political allegory which traces the history of India through the character of Saleem Sinai, who is born at the stroke of midnight as India gained its independence and has special powers and a connection with the other children

who were born at that same hour, which marked the beginning of a new age in the history of the Indian subcontinent. The novel has been seen as a fable about modern India. Rushdie's third novel *Shame*, which was published in 1983, is about the political history of Pakistan, depicted through characters who are based on Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and General Zia Ul Haq. Both these novels employ the technique of magic realism and represent the outlook of an immigrant, especially as a member of the post-independence diaspora. It was the publication of *The Satanic Verses* in 1988, which ran into controversy leading to accusations of blasphemy and the issue of a fatwa by Ayatollah Khomeini, the Supreme Leader of Iran in 1989. *The Moor's Last Sigh* was published in 1995 and it examines the history of the Zogoiby family and draws on actual historical events as the demolition of the Babri Masjid, the Mumbai bomb blasts and figures such as the notorious gangster Dawood Ibrahim and political heavy weights such as Bal Thackeray. The novel can be seen as an elegy on the lost homeland of Mumbai whose cosmopolitanism is fractured by the divisions of extremism and nationalism. The themes of loss and exile appear to be recurrent in the fiction of Salman Rushdie.

Shalimar the Clown, which appeared in 2005, is perhaps the most gripping and powerful novel about the Indian subcontinent after *Midnight's Children* and *The Moor's Last Sigh*. It explores the loss of yet another homeland, Kashmir. In his 2002 nonfiction book, *Step Across This Line*, Rushdie wrote, "there has never been a period in the history of the world when its peoples were so jumbled up." Here, he writes: "Our lives, our stories, flowed into one another's, were no longer our own, individual, discrete." And: "Everywhere was a mirror of everywhere else. Executions, police brutality, explosions, riots: Los Angeles was beginning to look like wartime Strasbourg; like Kashmir." The novel reminds us that if we forget history, we are doomed to repeat it with tragic consequences. *Shalimar the Clown* is about love and terrorism. It mourns the loss of the paradise that was Kashmir.

Salman Rushdie is dexterous at transforming the experiences of his protagonists into historical allegory. He examines serious political, historical and religious issues, making use of magic realism, black comedy and satire. *Midnight's Children* is a historical allegory based on events before and after the independence and partition of India. Saleem Sinai, who is the narrator and protagonist of the novel, is born at the exact hour that India gained its independence and is gifted with telepathic powers. The story of the Sinai family gets transformed into a parable, a modern fable of the nation and follows its journey beyond independence. Similarly *Shame*, Rushdie's third significant novel, explores the turbulent history of Pakistan through the characters of Iskander Harappa and General Raza Hyder who are based on the actual historical figures of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and General Zia Ul Haq. The themes of violence, shame and shamelessness are presented through the characters of Omar Khayyám and Sufiya Zenobia. *The Moor's Last Sigh* traces the history of the eccentric Indian-Jewish family of Moraes Zogoiby, transforming it into a historical parable of some of the turbulent events in recent times and some actual political figures. *Shalimar the Clown* narrates a triangular love story gone awry and transforms it into metaphor representing the fate of Kashmir and its devastating decline from being a paradise into a hotbed of terrorism and hatred.

II. THE INHERITANCE OF PAIN AND LOSS

Shalimar the Clown was published in 2005 and is a substantial work examining the lives of compelling characters whose lives are intertwined with the saga of Kashmir. The title of the novel *Shalimar the Clown* is derived from the name of Shalimar Gardens in Srinagar. The Shalimar Gardens in Srinagar is one of the several Mughal gardens which were laid out in various parts of India when the Mughals ruled India. Thus the title of the novel itself is a reminder of history. It is suggestive of a garden of Paradise which has now been transformed into Inferno. The title is also a reference to the character named Shalimar in the novel, who used to walk the tightrope in his native village for the amusement of the other villagers. The implication is that Kashmiri natives are walking the tightrope trying to maintain a delicate balance between the past and the present, between neo imperialism and terrorism. The novel spans a journey from Nazism to terrorism, from Kashmir to California and charts a story of love, betrayal and revenge which serves as a parable of a lost Paradise. The novel is in five parts representing different perspectives of individuals whose personal lives

are mirrored by the fates of their nations. Cutting across the lines of the personal and the public, *Shalimar* is Rushdie's tribute to a lost Paradise, a homeland which has been destroyed by violence. The destruction of Kashmir lies at the heart of this passionately written novel. Shalimar's original profession as a tightrope artiste comes a full circle when he becomes the member of an international terror organization. "He remembered his father teaching him to walk the tightrope, and realised that travelling the secret routes of the invisible world was exactly the same." Walking the tightrope becomes the ultimate symbol and a metaphor for history. "Everywhere was now a part of everywhere else," we learn in the first chapter. "Our lives, our stories, flowed into one another's, were no longer our own." The children of Paradise are doomed to self destruct. Their inheritance is an inheritance of pain and loss. The destinies of individuals are closely intertwined with destinies of nations. The central character India, whose grand destiny is to come to terms with the roots of the past and symbolically renames herself Kashmira, becomes the metaphor of lives and nations flowing into one another.

The novel revolves around powerfully drawn characters. Max Ophuls, whose name resonates that of the German movie director, is of Jewish origin. He was a resistance fighter and aviator during the Second World War and eventually makes his career in America. He is appointed as the US ambassador to India and he is able to move across various frontiers and time zones with perfect ease because he is at heart an adventurer, a traveler, a cosmopolitan, a charmer with a way with women. He creates an impression in India that he understands history and the pain of displacement and exile because of his own French Jewish background and experience of torture and persecution during the War, that he is familiar with 'shifting frontiers, upheavals and dislocations, flights and returns, conquests and reconquests'. He wins the trust and affection of the people of the subcontinent. But pretty soon he becomes involved in a scandal. He has an affair with a Hindu Kashmiri dancer named Boonyi. She is married to a Kashmiri Muslim. A daughter is born out of this adulterous relationship. The storm that ensues ends the diplomatic career of Max Ophuls. Their relationship becomes a modern day parable of the loss of the pristine beauty and innocence of Kashmir : it symbolizes the relationship between America and the East. Ophuls seduces Boonyi with goods and cosmetics. America seduces the East with its power and commodities and heartlessly abandons the prey once it has taken what it wants. Boonyi becomes the victim of America's lust for power.

"I am your handiwork made flesh", she tells Ophuls: You took beauty and created hideousness ... Look at me. I am the meaning of your deeds. I am the meaning of your so-called love, your destructive, selfish, wanton love. Look at me. Your love looks just like hatred. ... I was honest and you turned me into your lie. This is not me. This is not me. This is you.(3)

Ophuls is transformed into a neo imperialist from being a War time hero of the resistance movement against Nazi forces, thereby supporting the very forces that he fought against in his youth. As a representative of the free world he becomes involved in strategic arms deals with terror organizations such as the Taliban and Al Qaeda. The narrator observes: "Ambassador Max Ophuls these days was supporting terror activities while calling himself an ambassador for counterterrorism" (272). When Boonyi dances before him in the hunting lodge in Kashmir, he is reminded of the showgirls who danced before the Nazis, victims entertaining oppressors for personal gain and he is led to think:

I'm not a Nazi...I'm the American ambassador, the guy in the white hat. I'm for God's sake one of the Jews who lived. She swung her hips for him and he thought, And I'm also a married man. She swung her hips again and he ceased to think. (141)

The Wheel of Power has indeed turned. The guy in the white hat is now the neo imperialist fascist who may not have the malignancy of the Nazis but who is driven to abuse power out of self interest and has the tendency to look away from the consequences of the abuse of power. When confronted with the fallen Boonyi he realizes: "In this moment of his story he was not the victim. In this moment she, not he, had the right to claim kinship with the lost" (205).

This story of seduction and betrayal is narrated in flashback. The paradise that was Kashmir is destroyed by power driven predators. The seduction of Kashmir by the West has given birth to an illegitimate offspring named India Ophuls a. k. a. Kashmira. India lives in California and loves her father. When the novel opens the beautiful India Ophuls meets her father for her birthday lunch. "He was the high priest of the golden bough. He inhabited his enchanted grove and was adored." At the conclusion of the first segment, Max is brutally murdered at the steps of India's apartment building by his Kashmiri chauffeur Shalimar. India had been fascinated when the new driver had first told her that he was from Kashmir. It awakened a longing in her to connect with the homeland of her mother. The brutal murder of her father sends her into a state of shock and

silence and leads her to ruminate and connect the present with the past. She tries to come to terms with who her father really was, what he had done and who her mother really was. The story of India- Kashmira becomes the parable of the new ethnicities and new power equations generated by globalization and perhaps offers a way out of the old power structures which created divisions and conflicts.

The second part of the novel entitled *Boonyi* is set in a village named Pachigam in the Kashmir Valley. This is the Kashmir of the 1960s. It is a pure paradise, "bathed in the relentless clarity of mountain sunlight", where a young Hindu Kashmiri girl Boonyi Kaul falls in love with a young Muslim boy named Noman Sher Noman also known as Shalimar. Pachigam is a peaceful mix of Hindus and Muslims, a way of life the novel explores through the village's ancient myths and legends. The village subscribes to the informal doctrine of "Kashmiriyat, Kashmiriness, the belief that at the heart of Kashmiri culture there was a common bond that transcended all other differences." "We are all brothers and sisters here," Shalimar's father, Abdullah, the leader of a Felliniesque band of traveling players, proclaims. "There is no Hindu-Muslim issue."

The rest of the novel is about the transformation of the Kashmir from being a paradise of beauty and love into a hell of destruction and hatred. The transformation of Shalimar and Boonyi from being a pair of idyllic lovers to individuals who are torn apart by self interest, materialism and betrayal, mirrors the transformation of their native land. Rushdie describes in detail the lush green beauty of Kashmir and the joviality of the two communities living in peace and harmony before it was destroyed by the brutality and violence of divisive politics. The lovers are not driven apart by communal intolerance as one would expect from the scenario but by other powerful forces. Boonyi leaves Shalimar for Max and Shalimar is transformed into a ruthless jihadi propelled by feelings of hatred and revenge. It is the transformation of Shalimar that symbolizes the blood ridden history of Kashmir: . Love gone sour. Paradise turned into a raging inferno. Rushdie writes: "It turned out that hatred and love were not so very far apart. The levels of intimacy were the same." He threatens Boonyi, "I'll never forgive you. I'll have my revenge. I'll kill you and if you have any children by another man I'll kill the children too." The novel can be interpreted an elegy on the loss of paradise, the loss of an ideal of tolerance and cultural pluralism. The story of the doomed relationship between Boonyi and Max can be seen as a representation of selfishness and aggressive power politics which have led to the destruction of Kashmir.

The most moving and powerfully depicted part of the novel is where Rushdie describes the violence in Kashmir perpetrated by both the extremist groups and the Indian Army.

There were six hundred thousand Indian troops in Kashmir but the pogrom of the pandits was not prevented, why was that? Three and a half lakhs of human beings arrived in Jammu as displaced persons and for many months the government did not provide shelters or relief or even register their names, why was that? When the government finally built camps it only allowed for six thousand families to remain in the state, dispersing others around the country where they would be invisible and impotent, why was that? ... There was one bathroom per three hundred persons in many camps why was that ... and the pandits of Kashmir were left to rot in their slum camps, to rot while the army and the insurgency fought over the bloodied and broken valley, to dream of return, to die while dreaming of return, to die after the dream of return died so that they could not even die dreaming of it, why was that why was that why was that why was that why was that. (297)

Rushdie responds through rhetoric to the brutal senseless violence carried out by the army :

Who lit that fire? Who burned that orchard? Who shot those brothers who laughed their whole lives long? Who killed the sarpanch? Who broke his hands? Who broke his arms? Who broke his ancient neck? Who shackled those men? Who made those men disappear? Who shot those boys? Who shot those girls? Who smashed that house? Who smashed that house? Who smashed that house? ... Who killed the children? Who whipped the parents? Who raped that lazy-eyed woman? Who raped that grey-haired lazy-eyed woman as she screamed about snake vengeance? Who raped that woman again? Who raped that woman again? Who raped that woman again? Who raped that dead woman? Who raped that dead woman again? (308)

The epigraph taken from Romeo and Juliet , "A curse on both your houses" takes on a new meaning in the context of the political and historical turmoil of Kashmir. There appears to be a curse indeed on the land of Kashmir which has catapulted it to its terrible fate.

Boonyi is forced to return to Pachigam after the scandal and is disowned by both the families, hers and that of Shalimar, for her betrayal of trust. Shalimar wants to kill her but is prevented from doing so by the promise he had made to her father and his that he would wait until they died before he kills her. Obsessed by vengeance and rage he takes training under jihadist and terror organizations to become a killer.

Assassination is the path he takes to wreak havoc on those whom he considers responsible for his personal tragedy.

The fourth section of the novel, also entitled *Shalimar the Clown*, describing the evolution of Shalimar from a circus performer to a cold blooded assassin, offers insight into the psychology which lies at the roots of terrorism. Shalimar, simmering with hatred and vengeance, continues his training at terrorist camps in Afghanistan and Phillipines. He works his way into America and gets himself employed as Max's chauffeur as part of a revenge plan and eventually ends up murdering the former diplomat on the footsteps of his daughter's apartment building. He is captured and convicted. He manages to escape from San Quentin and makes his way to Los Angeles to fulfill his vow of killing India Ophuls. The novel ends on a note of suspense leaving the readers to guess what happens after Shalimar enters India's room knife in hand. The assassination of Ophuls is a microcosmic playing out of the hatred of the east for the west on account of its interference and an aggressive display of power in the sensitive areas in the subcontinent. The history of nations is played out through individuals.

Shalimar the Clown is a serious novel on a serious subject matter. It took Rushdie four years to write the novel. It is a gripping work like so much of his writing. It's a combination of history fantasy , magic realism and allegory. For Rushdie himself the work is foremost a story about love and not so much terrorism. The novel is about both : love and hatred , multi-culturalism and terrorism. It gives an empathetic and astute portrayal of the psyche of the terrorist.

"There's an argument," he says, "which is that to humanise them is a kind of exoneration. And obviously I don't think that. It's wrong to say that by understanding people you somehow let them off the hook. There was a recent film about the last days of Hitler, *Downfall*, and it showed all of them, Hitler and Eva Braun etc, as rounded characters, with moments of affection. It kind of makes it worse, when you can see that these are not cartoon villains, but are real people making these hideous decisions. In a way it does the opposite of exonerating them."

He wants to deny his readers the comfort of a simple reaction to figures who inspire hatred.

"At times such as the ones we're all living through, it's a thing that the novel can offer, which very few other kinds of writing can: to take you inside people's hearts and minds and make you see how it is. Or at least a version of how it might be. I think it's valuable."

Jason Cowley observes in his review of the novel in *The Observer* :

Shalimar is an altogether different book: calmer, more compassionate, wiser. If Fury was about the end of so much - of a marriage, of the dotcom boom, of sanity itself - Shalimar looks to several new beginnings: reflecting on what has been lost in Kashmir, it also looks forward to a time when the words Muslim and Hindu will once more be merely 'descriptions' rather than 'divisions'. The book ends on a note of hope and reconciliation.

III. CONCLUSION

Reviewers and scholars have assessed the novel through various lenses: post-colonial, historical, political fable, a lament on the destruction of Kashmir, a revenge tragedy. Whichever lens one chooses to view this sprawling epic, the fact remains the work raises crucial questions about the issues that plague our times, issues of fundamentalism, neo imperialism and terrorism. In the post 9/11 scenario, these key issues need to be addressed by intellectuals and artists. *Shalimar the Clown engages with the repressions and exclusions that the postcolonial state imposes on its periphery, exemplified in the continuing struggle between India and Pakistan over Kashmir. By discussing "terror" and "terrorism" and how Rushdie subverts these terms in relation to identity, violence and the effects on the individual, this article argues that Shalimar the Clown reroutes postcolonial paradigms by examining transnational terror networks, and their regional and international impact on politics, cultures and identities.* Finally *Shalimar the Clown* is a tale recounted by a raconteur par excellence.. It is brilliant, magical and fascinating like the other works by Rushdie, it is a story well spun by one of the most skillful novelists of our times. It is compelling and powerful. The last word on this subject has to be that of the author himself:

'It seems to me, more and more, that the fictional project on which I've been involved ever since I began Midnight's Children back in 1975 is one of self-definition. That novel, Shame and The Satanic Verses strike me as an attempt to come to terms with the various component parts of myself - countries, memories, histories, families, gods. First the writer invents the books; then, perhaps, the books invent the writer.

But whenever I say anything about my work I want to contradict myself at once. To say that beyond self-exploration lies a sense of writing as sacrament, and maybe that's closer to how I feel: that writing fills the hole left by the departure of God.

But, again, I love story, and comedy, and dreams. And newness: the novel, as its name suggests, is about the making of the new.

None of this is quite true; all of it is true enough.

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