

JOCULAR FANTASY AS MOCKERY AND MAGIC REALISM IN SALMAN RUSHDIE'S SHAME

Andrei Dimitrie Borcan
PhD, "Ovidius" University of Constanța

Abstract: *Shame* is and is not a book about Pakistan – an invented, imaginary country. Being a novel of magic realism, it refers to the history of a country "at a certain angle" from the real ground, and to the stories of two families of political leaders and of that of their doctor as a work of imagination distorting reality, and looking into it to find explanations for the personal destinies of the characters, for the failures of the families, and for the political revolutions and internal wars making up the troubled history of Pakistan.

"Shame" and "shamelessness" appear to be basic notions of the mentality of the characters and explanations of their destinies. In an interval of a few years, all the destinies of the important characters end in failure and death.

As derived from the notional pair before mentioned, "puritan" and "epicure" seem to be two basic outlooks, motivating civil wars and revolutions.

"Shame" and "the Beast" are the two nicknames under which people call Sufiya, the retarded serial criminal girl gathering the unexpressed shame of everyone around her or related to her and turning it into extreme violence.

Although the tone of the narrative is apparently jocular, the facts making up the characters' destinies and the history of the country are actually tragic.

Keywords: *shame; shamelessness; beast; magic realism; irony*

Shame is and is not a book about Pakistan – an invented, imaginary country "the failure of a dreaming mind," according to Malcolm Bradbury. Being a novel of magic realism, it refers to the history of a country "at a certain angle" from the real ground, and to the stories of two families of political leaders and of that of their doctor as a work of imagination distorting reality, and looking into it to find explanations for the personal destinies of the characters, for the failures of the families and for the political revolutions and internal wars making up the troubled history of Pakistan.

Roots, I sometimes think, are a conservative myth, designed to keep us in our places (*Shame* 86)

The notion of patriotic roots is extremely strange to the author. He considers it a mere means of manipulating people's minds into tying them into remaining docilely chained to a certain conservative origin home myth, not being free to choose and change homes.

As for me: I, too, like all migrants, am a fantasist. I build imaginary countries and try to impose them on the ones that exist. (*Shame* 87)

Admitting to be a fantasist, the author confesses that the facts that form the plot of the book are either remembered or imaginary ones, imposed on the current reality, which makes Peccavistan a rather imaginary country. There are facts in the book that would normally belong to fairy tales (Sufiya Zinobia becoming a panther, Babar becoming a golden angel, Naveed giving birth to an arithmetical progression of twins, all born on the same date of successive years, a.s.o.) The author creates his book when he no longer lives in Pakistan, he has migrated to the United Kingdom, so the tense of these fantasy memories is the past.

When attentively reading Salman Rushdie's work on Pakistan's historical reality, one can find under the jocular tone of his fantastic story a harsh mockery addressed to the history, customs, religion, dogmas of the Pakistani.

To start with, what is the name of the country? He answers that it is nothing more than a British acronym of the names of the provinces that form Pakistan. Therefore, he might as well suggest another name for the country of his story: "Peccavistan", deriving from "Peccavi" or "I have sinned" in Latin, whose choice he seemingly motivates by the inclusion of the province of Bangladesh in the name of the country, but which corresponds to the general outlook of "shame" that characterises everything and everybody in that country.

Then, his attitude to Muslim religion is ironical. First, he calls Allah "Al-lah", joking on the general structure of the Arab names, and Mohammed is "Mahmoud". The few most pious Muslims in the book, who pray at least five times a day, are marked by a "*gatta*", a bruise on their foreheads, as the result of too many prayers, and are criticised by Farah Zoroaster as people who spend their time with their buttocks higher than their foreheads.

This opposition – the epicure against the puritan- is, the play tells us, the true dialectic of history (*Shame* 240)

The narrator describes here what he thinks are the two opposing parties of any historical conflict. They are always similar to the conflict between Maximilien Robespierre and Georges Danton, famous figures of the French Revolution. Robespierre seems to have been strict, severe, rarely enjoying life, whereas Danton seems to have been a "bon viveur". This led to his being punished by a sentence to death. Thus, Danton appears to stand for the "shameless", whereas Robespierre stands for the "shame."

"Nobody can topple me," Isky's ghost tells the electronic shade of the Angrez journalist, "not the fat cats, not the Americans, not even you. Who am I? I am the incarnation of the people's love." (*Shame* 184)

Although Iskander Harappa has been imprisoned for many months, he is optimistic and certain of his final liberation and salvation, because of the common people's love for such hedonistic and charming characters like him. He proves to be mistaken, as he does not understand the rules of a civil war and is going to be finally executed.

When showing her daughter Arjumand the shawls revealing the life and sins of Iskander, Rani speaks about his obsession with annihilating his enemies by reducing them to the condition of cockroaches.

But he wanted more, only annihilation was good enough for his opponents, he wanted them squashed like cockroaches under his boot" (*Shame* 241)

Ironically, when imprisoned by Raza, Iskander is the home of cockroaches and spiders invading him. Rani's shawls masterfully depict the dishonesty of Iskander's oaths as repulsive creatures, all vividly coloured:

Iskander's mouth was as wide as the Abyss, the oaths represented by foul creatures crawling from his lips, vermilion cockroaches, magenta lizards, turquoise leeches, ochre scorpions, indigo spiders, albino rats (*Shame* 253)

The anonymous narrator draws a clear parallel between the Pakistani internal war and the French Revolution. He cites Büchner's book about Danton and Robespierre, stating that the former was an epicurean, while the latter was a puritan. People prefer puritans, so revolutions are achieved by them, according to the narrator. In the novel, Iskander Harappa and Omar Khayyam Shakil are epicurean, leading shameless hedonistic lives. Raza Hyder is a puritan leading a life governed by shame. One might say that, at the end of the novel, when he is the dictator president of Peccavistan, he is comparable to the Iranian fundamentalists: he bans alcoholic drinks, he drastically changes television programmes, admitting only those with theological themes, he imprisons beggars and the members of the opposition party (which, he says, is a party of beggars), he contends that God and socialism are incompatible notions, he is advised by the voice of Maulana Dawood (i.e. the voice of the rightful, who always haunts him by sounding advice in his right ear) to oblige women to go out only veiled, to forbid imported foreign films, to encourage men to be severe and cruel to women.

Western culture and especially movies are considered to be politically dangerous. It goes as no surprise that Mahmoud the Woman's cinema hall is destroyed by a bomb because it holds shows of decadent western films. Mahmoud, sexistically nicknamed „the Woman”, dies in the explosion. His daughter, Bilquis, is going to carry the trauma of this incident throughout her life. The novel starts with a criminal explosion and ends with another criminal explosion, this time destroying the mansion of Nishapur and the Beast. Explosions and destruction are cyclical events in Peccavistan.

Tradition and religious culture is mocked at in the voice of the rightful with which dead Mauana Dawood haunts the right ear of dictator Raza Hyder for four years with fundamentalist advice. Meanwhile, Raza's left ear is haunted by the Macchiavelli's quotations that evil dead Iskander's voice keeps on talking to him. A dictator's delirating brain appears to be symbolically influenced by two contradictory factors: fundamentalism and macchiavelism.

“Shame” is the most common word characterizing the society in the novel, the characters and the outlook on their world that all the people of Peccavistan have. Why so? There is not a clear motivation. One should be ashamed, one has to be ashamed to be a good Muslim and a good Pakistani. Everybody is ashamed of everything. First, the hero of the novel has the appearance of an antihero, being obese, bullied by his schoolmates and later by his peers, physically repugnant and disgusting to women, and destroying his horse under his overweight: the horse falls flat with his four legs spread under his weight. Then his very name is chosen ironically: he is called Omar Khayyam, although he never writes a single rubaiyat, which is a mockery addressed to the Muslim Persian culture. Omar is breastfed from six breasts by three mothers until the age of six. But nobody knows which of the three sisters was his real mother, and if only one of them could have given birth to him, how could they all have milk to give the child? Mystery and shame mark the relationship of their welded trio, as well as that of their three male servants, who are said to have homosexual links between them. Therefore, everything is shameful in the palace of Nishapur, where the three mothers dwell. Nobody will ever know which of them carried the pregnancy, as all of them had identical symptoms. They felt identical pains; in three wombs a single baby and its two ghostly mirror-images kicked and turned with the precision of a well-drilled dance troupe (*Shame* 30)

The three mothers' thinking on the outside realities is twisted by shame, too. Thus, when Omar gets a scholarship from the highschool at the age of twelve, they think this means the pity of the society for their lack of money, not a personal merit, and thus, should be refused as shame, and they sell all their valuables to pay for his tuition and do not accept a public scholarship.

When Omar leaves the mansion of Nishapur, the only piece of advice he gets from his mothers is to be “shameless,” which he observes throughout most of his life, looking for pleasure hedonistically together with Iskander Harappa, the womanizer.

Shame has a special trait of sexism. However, is the book feminist or anti-feminist? If one considers the welded trio of the mothers-sisters who have produced both Omar Khayyam and, twenty years later, his brother Babar in a mysterious pregnancy, it is definitely anti-feminist. Moreover, the narrator puts forward the idea of “parthenogenesis” adopted by the sisters to explain the immaculate conception of babies in the Nishapur mansion. Isn't this an irony to the Christian myth?

At the end of the novel, when Omar and Raza look for shelter in the three mothers' mansion, being afraid of the murdering panther that Sufiya Zenobia has become, the mothers tell Omar that his father was the devil, whereas his brother Babar's father was an archangel. That is why Omar was so monstrous and wicked and Babar so beautiful, golden-looking and kind-hearted.

Gossip is like water. It probes surfaces for their weak places, until it finds the breakthrough point; so it was only a matter of time before the good people of Q. hit upon the most shameful, scandalous explanation of all (*Shame* 64)

When Farah Zoroaster gets pregnant at fourteen years of age after her being mesmerised by Omar, it is not specified whether she got the child from her teacher Eduardo Rodrigues, or from Omar (as a rape) or from both, and the mystery is dismissed as unimportant, since it is solved by her marriage to the teacher, and Omar shows no pangs of conscience. Eduardo marries Farah, but she returns husbandless and childless to the city of Q., and the narrator suggests a number of possibilities for her past: either she had a miscarriage or she intentionally lost the baby, or she abandoned it to an orphanage or to his father, and she left his father as well. Anyway, it does not matter which was her story, as she becomes a symbol of shame in any case.

Shame is congenital. At her birth, Sufiya Zinobia is considered a shame because she is not the male her parents expected, and because she is the tiniest and thinnest baby girl in the city. The new born is already ashamed of these, as she blushes under the others' eyes. When a boy is expected to be born to the Raza Hyder couple, there is a frenzy of dreams about his glorious future (but the baby is still born), however, when a daughter is born, the father makes a rage scene, he doubts and contests the baby's gender, the birth is a tragedy, a shame, not a reason for joy. Sufiya Zinobia blushes from the moment of her birth, for the shame of being born a girl.

On the entrance of a select club of the city there is the sexist announcement: "No women and dogs are allowed." Also, the figure of Farah Zoroaster has traits of both admirable and despicable feminism, being both independent and extremely intelligent, and vulgar and promiscuous, so it remains ambiguous to the reader.

The narrator also mentions a sequence of "The Night of the Generals" film, where Peter O'Toole visits an art gallery and cuts all the paintings showing female nudes. Is it not a symptom of psychiatric sexism? And, unfortunately, it is perfectly in accordance with Muslim fundamentalism.

In Bariamma's forty-bedded dormitory of young women, in the deepest dark, under the cover of Bariamma's loud snoring (either real or acted), there is illicit sex making every night, resulting in a lot of pregnancies, but the comment is that the dark is so black that one cannot know who has slept with whom, and the result is probably collective debauchery, and even incestuous affairs, but it does not matter who is actually whose baby, since there is always a legal father for every child.

The women's chatting in Bariamma's house is about husbands' domestic violence (which fills the talkers' hearts with delight and interest) and about rapes, affairs, God, frigidity, typhoid fever, opium consuming poets, gamblers, homosexuality, sterility, bandits, food high prices, murders, crime, all mixed together, in a feminist gossip. The jocular tone of the writer covers irony regarding the society's topics of interest. "Gossip is like water."

Bariamma's mildly droning recital of the catalogue of family horrors had the effect of somehow defusing them, making them safe, embalming them in the mummifying fluid of her own incontrovertible respectability. The telling of the tales proved the family's ability to survive them, to retain, in spite of everything, its grip on its honour and its unswerving moral code. (*Shame* 76)

These sentences come after a list of mishapening. When "embalming" or "mummifying" painful events, the female narrators make them easier to accept. The author comments on the characters' ability to survive through such terrible events, and the women narrate them because they are passed and they have got over them already.

Sexism may be accompanied by reversed racism. Thus, men who go to Europe to work, generally come back home each with a wife number two, who is white. Such white number two

wives live isolated from the men's families, in their community, a sort of concubines' village. Thus, conflicts with the main wives are avoided.

I'll be fair: nobody likes the Loo, that hot afternoon breath-that-chokes. We pull down our shutters, hang damp clothes over the windows, try to sleep. (*Shame* 189)

The Loo wind with oppressive force unsettling Bilquis becomes a metaphor for pain in marriage. None of the marriages narrated in the novel is happy. They are all conflictual. There is a clear expression of the war of the sexes in each of them. Iskander Harappa cheats on his wife Rani with his mistress Pinkie. Raza's wife Bilquis cheats on him and pays for this sin by begetting an idiot criminal daughter. This daughter symbolically kills and disembowels all the two hundred and eighty turkeys that make the wealth of Pinkie. Being a retarded young woman, she can never consume the wedding with Omar (or a normal sexual relationship with any other man) without turning it into an insane reason for murdering men. Naveed's marriage to Talvar is a long series of pregnancies and abnormal childbirths of twins, that destroys her both physically and mentally, not affecting, however, her husband's indifference to the matter and leading her to suicide.

I had thought, before I began, that what I had on my hands was an almost excessively masculine tale... But the women seem to have taken over, they marched in from the peripheries of the story to demand the inclusion of their own tragedies, histories and comedies, obliging me to couch my narrative in all manner of sinuous complexities, to see my 'male' plot refracted, so to speak, through the prisms of its reverse and 'female' side. (*Shame* 173)

What the author had planned as a historical and political plot, including men exclusively, seems to have proved to be more complex regarding the gender importance to the plot of the female characters. If one considers the title, at least, the novel refers to a feminine character. Thus, women advance from the "peripheries" of the story to a core position, they take control of the events in the book, which becomes the tale of an extreme feminist madness case.

Arjumand Harappa, the perfect beauty of the city, hates her status of a woman, and men. She is an ironical caricature of the feminist leadership. She tries to press her breasts into flatness by wrapping them with tight bandages. She is uselessly courted by lots of young men. Nicknamed the "Virgin Ironpants," she is resolute about her singleness and she is revolted that other young women do not share her sexual views. Her mother, Rani Harappa, Iskander's wife, spends her life weaving masterpiece shawls describing all the history of mis her husband has subjected her to. These shawls are her only treasure, carefully kept under lock in a case, which she passes to her daughter as feminist memories that should not be lost. They somehow look like the tapestry of Bayeux that the Norman duchess once wove to keep the memory of the battle of Hastings unforgotten. Rani is not the only weaver in the novel. Her dear friend Bilquis weaves and cuts black pieces of cloth that she calls "shrouds," and which will further be used as parqua clothes to ironically save two men's (Raza's and Omar's) lives by dressing them as women.

She is not the only feminist men-hater in the book. At her sister Naveed's (i.e. "Good News") wedding with police officer Talvar Ulhaq, demented Sufiya Zinobia Hyder attacks Talvar ferociously, full of hatred against men, trying to kill him by switching his head and by biting his neck so badly, that he is hospitalised for a hundred days in a critical condition. Her former dementia manifested in beheading two hundred and eighty turkeys in her childhood seemed to have been cured long ago, but now it breaks out again with equal ferocity. A pretty twenty-year-old girl with the brain of a six-year-old one, she is asked to marry old doctor Omar Khayyam, who is fifty and obese, and in love with her, who is his patient, whom he sedates with injections. However, she only feels disgust for him.

She is called by her parents "Shame," because she is a female and not a male, because she is a tinier girl than the normal average, because she is mentally retarded, because she

periodically commits despicable murders against animals and humans. She is not aware of the terrible wickedness of her deeds during such criminal crises, the rest of the time she behaves and thinks like a childish young girl who enjoys preoccupations specific to small children, and who prefers young children and toddlers' company to that of the young adults of her age. She has an "*ayah*" (i. e. nurse), who permanently accompanies her, even when she gets married to Omar Khayyam, and who goes to bed and makes marital sex to Sufiya Zinobia's husband, as it would be impossible to teach the young wife her marital duties, and, moreover, it would be a danger for the husband's life to let her sleep with him, as she would behead him, as she has done before with four youngsters who raped her. Her psychiatric shame includes crises of blushing and heat that are so powerful and dangerous for the surrounding people that they make things melt or boil in her vicinity. She gathers in her madness all the unsolved shame of those around her, of her mother's having sinned in her youth, of every sinner in Peccavistan.

Men who deny their pasts become incapable of thinking them real. (*Shame* 144)

This comes after a passage in which Iskander Harappa is told to have been directly involved in Omar's brother Babar's killing. However, Omar ignores Iskander's crime and befriends him, sharing a lifestyle of pleasure with him. The quotation is a warning for the people who are too indifferent to their past, to the degree that it no longer seems real to them. Further in the novel, Omar is going to be rejected and disowned by his unforgiving mothers and he is finally killed by Sufiya Zinobia the panther. His ignored past and unavenged brother become his condemnation to death.

What is a woman's social role in Peccavistan, a Muslim country? Obviously, begetting children. Naveed (a.k.a. Good News) is so good at it, that she ironically gives birth to two twins in her first year of marriage, to triplets in the second year, to quadruplets in the third year, to quintuplets in the fourth year and to sextuplets in the fifth year. Motherhood does not make her happy or give her the satisfaction of an accomplished duty. Being pregnant again, this time with seven embryos, and already having twenty-seven infants and toddlers around, whom she cannot manage and who grow in a chaos, she is afraid that at such a rate of arithmetical progression, by the age of thirty she will have seventy-seven children. The situation may seem jocular and hilarious to the reader, but it is tragic for poor Naveed, who hangs herself. The better is the enemy of the good. Bilquis begot one still born boy, one demented criminal daughter and another normal daughter. But twenty-seven normal babies is too many to be good, and they threaten to announce a steady progression of twins that cannot be stopped otherwise than by the mother's shameful suicidal death, which poor Naveed accomplishes. Later in the book, her widower husband, having become a general of the police, is suspected by the paranoiac dictator Raza Hyder of plotting against him and is killed at the order of his own father-in-law. Thus, Raza gets twenty-seven orphan grandchildren whom he has to look after, for which he cannot find the necessary time. The situation is tragical and comical again.

I think what I'm confessing is that, however I choose to write about over there, I am forced to reflect that world in fragments of broken mirrors, the way Farah Zoroaster saw her at the bollarded frontier. I must reconcile myself to the inevitability of the missing bits. (*Shame* 69)

The narrator speaks here about the multiple truths and about the impossibility to grasp the whole ultimate truth about reality. Although he admits to be relatively satisfied with this limitation, he suffers about it.

Starting as jocular fantasy, the novel develops into a dramatic interweaving of destinies, all failed and ending in death in a brief period of time, covering the civil war of Pakistan. The causes of these individual tragedies are generally political, but Omar refers to the "Shame" or "Beast" standing for Sufiya Zinobia's victims and to the heroine herself.

The Beast has many faces. Some are always sad. (*Shame* 238)

This quotation considers the beast that dwells in Sufiya is an accident explained by many possible reasons, some biological (genetic), some biographical, some social. Sufiya is the tragic

and dangerous shameful consequence of the sins of other people and her sick cruelty is the expression of her repressed shame for their unresolved sins of various types, which her insane mind tries to pay back with death. All her faces are always sad, because she is a victim before being a crazy executioner. She has been for a long time the victim-patient of her doctor, Omar, who has treated her with sedating injections, while keeping her chained to a bed, and having her window walled with cement. She has lived in more cruel conditions than a mental hospital patient or a dangerous convict. Magic realism allows her to escape through the broken wall, out of her chains, like an invincible raging force. Nobody can tell where she has escaped to, or if she is still alive after her wall breaking and fall. But soon enough, animal and human victims start to be mentioned by people. No witness can describe the killer, except a boy who is not believed because he mentions an improbable white animal with a black head. If she regresses at the end of the novel to a white panther with a black head, that is to a killing beast, magic realism uses her as a symbolic character for the many sins of the other characters in the book: interpersonal faults, sexist errors, political crimes, everything can be seen as a justification of the existence of the horrible creature she has turned into.

Everyone closely connected to her – Bilquis-her mother, Raza-her father, Omar Khayyam-her husband, dies tragically at the end of the novel, paying for their unresolved sins to her. The Beast herself dies in the terrible fire destroying the mansion of Nishapur. The three avenging old mothers have disappeared, too, as if they had been nothing else than ghosts. The final chapter is one of the total apocalypse of the families and the world presented in the novel. Nothing and nobody survives and former faults are paid for. The Beast into which the Shame has turned dies herself, after accomplishing her terrible duty.

History was old and rusted, it was a machine nobody had plugged in for thousands of years, and here, all of a sudden it was being asked for maximum output (*Shame* 380)

The cycle of violence never ends. Genetic drawbacks and personal failure are expanded to historic tragedy.

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