

# On Blood and Blushing: Bipolarity in Salman Rushdie's *Shame*.

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Of Salman Rushdie's four books to date, his two most imaginative and convincing ones are undoubtedly *Midnight's Children* (1981) and *Shame* (1983). Whereas the former presents a fantasy based on the history of the entire Indian Subcontinent and thus on the bipolarity between Hindu and Muslim, between India and Pakistan, the latter focuses more sharply and more unrelentingly on the horrible and hideous aspects of the history of Pakistan.

In both novels, which attempt to prove seemingly significant parallels between nation, family, and individual, the personal level of the narrative is marked by a conflict between rivalling forces: in *Midnight's Children* clearly visible as the individual dichotomy of Saleem and Shiva, "Saleem as Doctor Jekyll being in constant fear of Shiva as Mr. Hyde"<sup>1</sup> in *Shame* even more openly present as the ongoing conflict in the interactions between the Harappa family and the Hyder family, which makes up the major part of the surface plot of this well-designed novel.<sup>2</sup> The inherent bipolarities in these conflicts, however, do not assume the same relative significance in both cases. *Midnight's Children* covers "everything about India,"<sup>3</sup> and thus branches out into various directions: The two contrasts of Indian versus British and Hindu versus Muslim eventually develop into the tripolarity of British-Hindu-Muslim, thus illustrating the possibility of multipolarities in Indian thought as opposed to the exclusive adherence to the concept of bipolarity in European philosophy. *Shame*, as this short article attempts to show, relies much more heavily on the European concept of bipolarity.

As numerous critics have remarked upon reading *Shame*,<sup>4</sup> one is immediately struck by a range of oppositions on a purely technical level of the narrative. Already the *Times Literary Supplement* review of the novel pointed out the tension between the voice of chapter one, "jocular, rhetorical and discursive," and the voice of chapter two, "much less squeamish" and with "a Western education, a residence in London and a family in Karachi."<sup>5</sup> Rajiva Wijesinha notes that the twin poles on which Rushdie bases his achievement are fantasy and fact and goes on to explain "the peculiar suitability of this sort of technique to exposition of third world political situations."<sup>6</sup> The opposition between

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<sup>1</sup> Rudolf Bader, "Indian Tin Drum," *The International Fiction Review* 11 (1984): 79.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Sura Prasad Rath, "Narrative Design in Salman Rushdie's *Shame*," *Journal of Indian Writing in English* 13.2 (1985): 27-38.

<sup>3</sup> Peter Nazareth, "Salman Rushdie, *Midnight's Children*," *World Literature Written in English* 21.1 (1982): 169.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. e.g., D.M. Fletcher, "Rushdie's *Shame* as Apologue," *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 21.1 (1986): 120-32; and Peter Brigg, "Salman Rushdie's Novels: The Disorder in Fantastic Order," *World Literature Written in English* 27.1 (1987): 119-30.

<sup>5</sup> Adam Mars-Jones, "A marriage of two minds," *The Times Literary Supplement* 9 September 1983: 949.

<sup>6</sup> Rajiva Wijesinha, "Salman Rushdie and the Fictions of Third World Politics," paper presented at the 7th Triennial Conference of ACLALS, Singapore, June 1986.

fantasy and fact could also be seen as one between dream and reality. This opposition or rather dichotomy is introduced quite early in *Shame*: "How young he [i.e., Omar Khayyam Shakil] was when he made the surprisingly adult resolution to escape from the unpalatable reality of dreams into the slightly more acceptable illusions of his everyday, waking life!"<sup>7</sup> This Kafkaesque sentence stands at the beginning of a series of similar statements spread over the entire novel. And indeed, there is a constant interplay between dream and reality on several levels of the novel.

The bipolarity between fantasy and fact rules over the whole plot, and it is designed so as to puzzle the uninitiated reader from the very beginning, setting out from the mixture of historical and fictional time dimensions, continuing with the fictional use of historical names like Omar Khayyam, and leading up to the obvious parallels between elements in the plot and facts from the history of Pakistan. By the time many readers probably start to wonder if this is going to turn into a political satire, the narrator informs us of his intention not to write a realistic novel about Pakistan. He goes on to explain: "But suppose this were a realistic novel! Just think what else I might have to put in" (69). And there follows a catalogue of corruption and injustice in the recent history of Pakistan. Once that catalogue has been deposited, the narrator finds it practical to retreat to his earlier assertion: "By now, if I had been writing a book of this nature, it would have done me no good to protest that I was writing universally, not only about Pakistan. The book would have been banned, dumped in the rubbish bin, burned. All that effort for nothing! Realism can break a writer's heart. Fortunately, however, I am only telling a sort of modern fairy-tale, so that's all right; nobody need get upset, or take anything I say too seriously. No drastic action need be taken, either. What a relief! (70). What a relief indeed for a narrator who seems to want to eat his cake and have it! What is at work here, as we shall see later, is a kind of "compulsory irony which insists, for the sake of good form, on being taken literally" (104). And this demonstrates the inherent bipolarity between fantasy and fact more clearly.

Apart from bipolarities employed on a technical or rather playful level<sup>8</sup> *Shame* operates mainly along the opposition between European and Oriental minds. This is signaled from the outset, when the town of Q., the hero's birthplace, is said to have a dumbbell shape: "These were the two orbs of the town's dumbbell shape: old town and Cantt, the former inhabited by the indigenous, colonized population and the latter by the alien colonizers, the Angrez, or British, sahibs" (11). The bipolarity between Europe and Asia, between Western and Eastern ways of life, is even responsible for tensions at work within the person of the narrator: "I tell myself this will be a novel of leavetaking, my last words on the East from which, many years ago, I began to come loose. I do not always believe myself when I say this. It is a part of the world to which, whether I like it or not, I am still joined, if only by elastic bands" (28). And later he calls himself "a translated man" who has been "borne across" (29) from one cultural sphere into another. He adds that there are not only things lost in translation, but something can also be gained. In other words, the opposition of two poles is believed to be fruitful, and the old European concept of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis still holds true.

It would be possible to trace this opposition through most chapters of *Shame*. To cut the argument short, however, let us proceed to the major cluster of bipolarities in the novel, evolving round the central theme indicated by the title. The theme of shame and its opposite, shamelessness, is carefully introduced throughout part one, "Escapes from the Mother Country." The hero of the novel (called thus by the narrator, but far from it by

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<sup>7</sup> Salman Rushdie, *Shame* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1983) 22. All further references are to this edition.

<sup>8</sup> One example would be the bipolarity between country life and city life (cf. pp. 104, 107, 144), which in turn is related to Rushdie's obvious obsession with frontiers and boundaries and the crossing of such boundaries by magic, by voyeurism, or by force. Another example would be the description of Arjumand Harappa, the virgin Ironpants, who "will always be ruled by extremes" (126).

traditional literary standards), Omar Khayyam Shakil, is himself conceived in shame, his mother becoming pregnant in the course of a wild party ("O shame, shame, poppy-shame!" 16), and she and her two sisters are called "shameless women" (17) by the narrator, because they are said to have poisoned Mistri Yakooob Balloch, who constructed the dumbwaiter by which the Shakil sisters keep their only contact with the outside world. After there have been several indications, leitmotif-like, of the opposition of shame and shamelessness, the word شرم (*sharam*) is explained and expounded on: "A short word, but one containing encyclopaedias of nuance. It was not only shame that his mothers forbade Omar Khayyam to feel, but also embarrassment, discomfiture, decency, modesty, shyness, the sense of having an ordained place in the world, and other dialects of emotion for which English has no counterparts. . . . What's the opposite of shame? What's left when *sharam* is subtracted? That's obvious: shamelessness" (39). Thus, it becomes clear that there is a direct relationship between the bipolarity of Europe and Asia and the one of shame and shamelessness. It appears that Omar Khayyam Shakil, through his adoption of European ways and morals, is unable to regain his due portion of *sharam* of which his mothers have deprived him. Part one of the novel lists a few further examples of shame and shamelessness,<sup>9</sup> and at last the town of Q. is called "the town of shame" (54).

After this prelude, part two, "The Duellists," stressing the concept of opposition, places the idea of *sharam* at the center of the reader's mind and groups the major bipolarities round it. It opens with a program of what the novel is about, culminating in the figure of Sufiya Zinobia: "This is a novel about Sufiya Zinobia, elder daughter of General Raza Hyder and his wife Bilquis, about what happened between her father and Chairman Iskander Harappa, formerly Prime Minister, now defunct, and about her surprising marriage to a certain Omar Khayyam Shakil, physician, fat man, and for a time the intimate crony of that same Isky Harappa, whose neck had the miraculous power of remaining unbruised, even by a hangman's rope. Or perhaps it would be more accurate, if also more opaque, to say that Sufiya Zinobia is about this novel" (59). M.D. Fletcher writes that Sufiya stands for "the destructive power of the violence resulting from an overdose of shame."<sup>10</sup> Peter Brigg refers to the inevitability of an orderly destiny at work in *Shame* and remarks: "At the apex of this organization is the personification of shame itself, Sufiya Zinobia Shakil, the mentally deficient daughter of Raza Hyder."<sup>11</sup> And this Sufiya Zinobia is married to Omar Khayyam Shakil, the apex of shamelessness: opposite poles are united in matrimony.

The rest of part two continues to enumerate instances of shame or shamelessness,<sup>12</sup> and while shame is often connected with the physiological phenomenon of blushing (e.g., Raza Hyder to Bilquis: "I must dress you, top to toe, as befits a blushing bride," 65), the shameless events in history are increasingly connected with bloody matters (e.g., "The recounting of histories," Raza told his wife, "is for us a rite of blood." 77). Sufiya Zinobia blushes for the shameless world. Thus, the bipolarity between shame and shamelessness is paralleled by the bipolarity between blushing and blood.

This is at once confirmed at the beginning of part three, "Shame, Good News and the Virgin." The first chapter (chapter seven) opens with the gruesome story of a Pakistani father in London who murders his daughter because she made love to a white boy: Only blood can wash away the shame she has brought over her family (cf. p. 115). This affair introduces a series of atrocious and bloody events which are let loose as the opposed poles of the Beauty and the Beast are made apparent in the character of Sufiya Zinobia: "The

<sup>9</sup> Cf. the shame or shamelessness displayed by the affair between Eduardo Rodrigues and Farah Zoroaster (48-52).

<sup>10</sup> M.D. Fletcher 130.

<sup>11</sup> Peter Brigg 128.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. the episode of Bilquis's nakedness (63-64).

beast inside the beauty. Opposing elements of a fairy-tale combined in a single character . . ." (139). While the narrator, with a side reference to Stevenson's *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* brings in the bipolarity between the male and the female (cf. p. 159), Sufiya is suddenly cleansed from her blushing "by her single, all-consuming explosion of shame" (162). This is her massacre of a lot of turkeys with her bare hands. The rest of the novel has a particularly large number of bloody atrocities in store: murders, massacres, beheadings, tortures, etc.

Bloody methods that remind us of the darkest Middle Ages are common practice in the historical periods covered by the plot of *Shame*. The full interpretation of the role of shame in the shape of Sufiya Zinobia and shamelessness in the shape of Omar Khayyam would render enough material for a whole thesis. For our purpose, however, it seems more appropriate to trace the origins of the bipolarity between shame and shamelessness, the origins from which the escalation of the two opposites sets forth. The narrator gives us a possible answer to this problem when, towards the end of part two, he explains the importance of تكلف (*takallouf*): "*Takallouf* is a member of that opaque, world-wide sect of concepts which refuse to travel across linguistic frontiers: it refers to a form of tongue-tying formality, a social restraint so extreme as to make it impossible for the victim to express what he or she really means, a species of compulsory irony which insists, for the sake of good form, on being taken literally. When *takallouf* gets between a husband and a wife, look out" (104). For the numerous meanings and implications of this rather enigmatic term, it is perhaps useful to look at the underlying Arabic verb of the fifth form, كلف among whose meanings we can find "to feign," "to affect or endeavour to acquire a quality." Thus, the idea of *takallouf*, itself incorporating the bipolarity of fact and fiction, as we have seen in connection with the use of the real country of Pakistan, can be held responsible to a considerable degree for the rise of the bipolarity between shame and shamelessness as expounded throughout this well-constructed novel.

Although many of the arguments could only briefly be dealt with and some very important aspects of the novel could only be touched upon, it is to be hoped that it has been made sufficiently clear that Salman Rushdie's *Shame* is a novel of intricate interpretative possibilities, a novel which appears more and more clearly to be constructed in terms of bipolarities and thus of Cartesian logics. Nevertheless, it ought to be remembered that *Shame*, even though it may employ European thinking, is still very much a novel about the dreams and realities of Pakistan, if not of the entire Indian Subcontinent.