

The Cream of the Crop: Female Characters in Salman Rushdie's *Shame*

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In the wake of the tragic international intrigue that surrounds Salman Rushdie, earlier works (written prior to *The Satanic Verses's* 1988 publication) have received little recent attention. Although preceding novels drew criticism—*Midnight's Children* reportedly aroused the ire of Indira Gandhi¹—none has drawn the international publicity that was sparked by Ayatollah Khomeini's death sentence. *Shame*, an early work and one of Rushdie's best, is a metafictional narrative of the history of Pakistan. In an eerie foreshadowing of the political reception of *The Satanic Verses*, Rushdie used allegory in *Shame*, claiming that a realistic text would cause the novel to be banned and burned.²

Critically, controversy has surrounded the reading of *Shame's* female characters. Although heralded by some critics as a feminist text,³ others find that Rushdie's novel "reinscribes the patriarchal role of women as passive."⁴ The female stories, marginal in Pakistani history, "explain, and even subsume, the men's" narratives in *Shame* (189). One unexplored explanation of this phenomenon can be found in the interpretation of the women as emblematic significations of Pakistan. The two major male characters, Raza Hyder and Iskander Harappa, are generally construed as satiric manifestations of historical rulers: General Zia-ul-Haq and Zulfikar ali Bhutto (Fletcher 121; Grewal 26).⁵ An emblematic reading of the female stories explains why the women dominate the narrative without controlling the plot.

Chhunni, Munnee, and Bunn y Shakil can be read as India before freedom. They represent the three major schisms in the country's culture—Indian, Pakistani, and English. Their house, like India itself, is equidistant from and caught between, the British and native sectors. The tripartite religious division of India is reflected by the women's caretakers—"Parsee wet nurses, Christian ayahs" and "iron morality" (5)—Hinduism, Christianity, and Islamic fundamentalism. The women invent private languages, representing one country divided by different tongues. When their father dies (emblematic of the end of British rule) "his financial incompetence," hidden behind a patriarchal veneer (7), leaves the three sisters (and the free nation of India) debt ridden. Paralleling

¹Patricia Merivale, "Saleem Fathered by Oskar: Intertextual Strategies in *Midnight's Children* and *The Tin Drum*," *Ariel: A Review of International English Literature* 21.3 (1990): 5-21.

²Salman Rushdie, *Shame* (New York: Vintage International, 1989) 72. All further references are to this edition and will appear in the text.

³M.D. Fletcher, "Rushdie's *Shame* as Apologue," *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 21.1 (1986): 120-32.

⁴Inderpal Grewal, "Salman Rushdie: Marginality, Women and *Shame*," *Gender* 3 (1988): 24-42.

⁵Also Helen Watson-Williams, "An Antique Land: Salman Rushdie's *Shame*," *Westerly: A Quarterly Review* 29.1 (1989): 37-45.

the instability of post-British Indian economy, the sisters sign away their fortune and their fertile land to pay debts. Like India's splintered cultural groups the personalities of the three sisters unite, recede from the world, and feed themselves by pawning their treasures.

Bilquis Kemel is emblematic of Muslim Pakistan during and after partition. Her father represents the dominant political identity—post-British India before partition. Bilquis, like Pakistan, is raised in a "fifth rate empire," a "Slave King's estate" (61). Her father's acceptance of both the Hindu and Muslim religions precipitates an "apocalypse" that initiates partition and causes Bilquis and Pakistan to lose their "eyebrows of belonging." Naked, they retain only their "green dupatta of modesty" (63,4)—the Islamic religion. Bilquis finds protection under military rule, marrying Raza Hyder, who covers her "shame" with a "military overcoat" (67). Like nascent Pakistan, Bilquis becomes afraid of the Loo—a wind that signals change. Her military husband likes "every thing in its place;" however, "the disease of fixity was hers" (70). Their firstborn child is not the healthy son they long for. Like Pakistan, he is "handicapped by the irreversible misfortune of being dead before he was born," strangled by his own umbilical link to life (86). Pakistan, as portrayed in this novel, will remain female.

Their second child, Sufiya Zinobia, is the "miracle that went wrong"—the Pakistan that arose after the dust and ashes of partition settled into the ground (92). She is split in two like the hair she will later divide to its roots (anticipating the emergence of Bangladesh): wise and loving she is also warlike and violent. Blushing from birth, this new Pakistan reddens from shame "whenever her presence in the world was noticed by others" (131). But the blood that rushes to Sufiya's cheeks is also the blood of the nation ready to be spilled. In infancy Sufiya contracts a brain fever that neither military nor civilian doctors can cure. She—the dispossessed—is saved by the potion of a local Hakim but her growth is stunted by his medicine—Islamic fundamentalism.

Sufiya's sister, Good News, symbolizes maternal fecundity, "the arithmetical progression of babies" that emerge from her womb (251). The rejection of birth control by her police chief husband implies the militant fundamentalism that unites the country while creating its evils. Good News's fertility threatens Pakistan's welfare and becomes the "broken rope" of its suicide (251).

Rani, which means queen, is married to Iskander, the "ablest statesman who ever ruled" Pakistan (197). Exiled and silenced by him, she knits shawls that are "composed of the same materials as the house." Rani, like the "earth and cracks and spiders" (213), is the soul of Pakistan. Weaving her country's past and future into eighteen magical shawls, she represents the eternity of the unspoken word. In the quasi harem in which she lived before her marriage, where men copulated with different women each night, Rani realized that no one "would know if her real husband had come to her" (75). In the end, does it matter which male ruler fornicates with Pakistan?

That orgy of fornication is emblemized by the body of Atiyah Auranzeb "known to her intimates as 'Pinkie'" (111). Pinkie's body, "excitingly on display"

(112) is the siren call of domination, fought over by Raza and Iskander. But her nickname betrays her ethnic identity—she is the white tyranny that ruled over a brown nation for so long. In the end Pinkie is worn out, older than her years, her allure having led too many men to their doom.

Sufiya's violent half, asleep throughout much of *Shame*, awakens and becomes corporeal. Paralleling many unsuccessful attempts to contain the masses, various male characters try to tame this beast through education, chains, and padlocked doors. In the end Sufiya is transformed into a white panther, "proud of her strength, proud of the violence that was making her a legend." The dispossessed discover a "nobility in their savagery" (281).

In preadolescence Chhunni, Munnee, and Bunny imagine their nipples as phallic fertilizers of the holes in men's chests (5). But the women in *Shame* are not Pakistan's impregnators; they are the receptive earth—the fruit and harvest of the land. The male characters motivate the plot; the women, through allegory, inscribe the love of a country torn to pieces. The passion many readers find inscribed in *Shame* is for this land. It is the ambivalent love of an expatriate for the country of his parentage—the love/hate a child feels for its mother.