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Narrating the Fragmented Nation: Shame, Hybridity, and National Identity in Salman Rushdie's *Shame*

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Abstract

This article analyzes how Salman Rushdie's novel *Shame* transforms shame from a private space into a public domain, where it becomes a collective discourse that reveals the instability of postcolonial national identity in Pakistan. While existing scholarship has emphasized the novel's political satire, feminist concerns, and magic realist techniques, less attention has been paid to shame as a mediating force between individual experience and nation formation. Drawing on Homi K. Bhabha's concepts of hybridity, ambivalence, and the Third Space, this article analyzes major characters and their shame as constitutive of national identity formation. The analysis, therefore, demonstrates that shame circulates through bodies, families, and institutions, and exposes contradictions between official narratives of national purity and lived realities of people. The article concludes that Rushdie presents Pakistan as a fragmented nation constituted through repression, mimicry, and hybrid identities.

Keywords: Ambivalence, hybridity, national identity, postcolonial, shame

Introduction

In his *Shame*, Salman Rushdie uses a fictional setting, which the author compares to Pakistan, to explore the effects of unresolved shame at both the personal and national levels. Through characters Sufiya Zinobia, Raza Hyder, and Iskander Harappa, the novel exhibits the destructive potential of unresolved shame. The personal shame of Sufiya Zinobia and the collective shame of ruling elites represented by Raza Hyder and Iskander Harappa constitute the failure of national identity through personal bodies. Thus, *Shame* offers a layered narrative history of two families and their personal entanglements to illustrate the political and cultural dynamics of postcolonial Pakistan.

At the core of the story is shame that begins with the main character, Omar Khayyam Shakil, and spreads like a contagion across bodies and space. The nature of his birth, his encounter with the Bariamma clan, and his treatment of Sufiya Zinobia converge in a single frame of Pakistan as a failed

national culture. Meanwhile, Iskandar Harappa's calculated yet turbulent political journey reflects Pakistan's swings between democracy, dictatorship, and internal corruption. Through the intertwined paths of Omar, Sufiya, Raza Hyder, and Iskandar Harappa, Rushdie creates an allegorical portrait of a nation grappling with its contradictions—honor and shame, power and fragility, public appearance and private pain. The novel's blend of history, myth, and satire ultimately reveals Pakistan's complex psycho-political landscape, where personal shame merges with the shame of the state.

This article centers on the concept of shame as it unfolds in the novel and connects personal issues to broader societal problems. Then it explains Rushdie's position—a nation is “a cultural space” (Bhabha, *Nation* 5) that has an “ambivalent emergence”; thus, it continually “inscribes a much more transitional social reality” (1). As a result, the concept of nation as a unified identity becomes a contested idea.

Review of Literature

Rushdie has long been at the center of debate for personal, literary, and political reasons. The political debate largely centers on his controversial book *The Satanic Verses* (1988). Among other works, *Shame* has received more attention as an example of magic realism, which Bhabha exalts as “the literary language of the emergent post-colonial world” (*Nation*, “Introduction” 7). Agnes Gyorke describes this novel as a “postmodern historical narrative, which represents historical events in a self-reflexive narrative frame” (188), and Jenni Ramone draws a similarity between *The Midnight Children* and *Shame*, noting that the former is “the India novel” and the latter is “the Pakistan novel” (193). Contrary to these critics, Felicity Gee contends that “Rushdie ultimately challenges any notion of transition as ‘magical,’ or as a miraculous journey of anti-heterocentrism, as unrealistic and glib” (89), like magic realism and its narrative technique. Rushdie's *Shame*, thus, is a historical narrative with ample avant-garde elements. Moreover, as Florian Stadler examines, Rushdie does not settle for a single theme or subject matter in his wide range of writing, with a “shifting thematic emphases” (4). Similarly, Samir Dayal evaluates *Shame* as “a subversive postcolonial” text that subverts the “normative national and gendered subjectivity in Pakistan” (40). The novel “can be said to offer a subversion of Pakistan's self-image and its sustaining gendered narrative of nation-ness” (40). The liminality of gender and nation is better manifested in the novel's exploitation of “the adjacency of different sites of ambivalence” (44). In his political explanation of the novel, Dayal views the novel's strength as its ability to bring out the seething social spectacle in a newly formed nation, Pakistan.

Similarly, for Justyna Deszcz, Rushdie tries “to create . . . the traditional fairytale” in *Shame*. In doing so, he presents a critique of structural situation of Pakistani state as well: “In *Shame*, Rushdie presents his critique of social and political life in Pakistan [that is] marked by the unification project aimed transforming the country into “the Land of the Pure” (31). To achieve, Rushdie uses the technique of incorporation of “several native women . . . [which] consequently suggests that it is women who suffer most from the injustices of the Pakistani social order” (31). The question of identity in the context of nationalist discourse places *Shame* “through a series of disjunctive moments” (Hussain 9). He argues further that “*Shame* ostensibly narrates a history, it actually reveals more of the crisis of narration itself” because the novel, and Rushdie himself being “obsessed with the problems of constructing a narrative and history, it becomes telling evidence of a post-colonial anxiety” (9). For David W. Hart, *Shame* is an example of “mockery of mimicry” itself since “the basic thesis in *Shame* is that shame, shamelessness, and violence are inextricably bound” (1) to each other. Though the novel is not historically accurate, the narrative fictionalizes the events and personalities; it essentially captures the historical context that the novel uses as background.

In a feminist reading of the novel, Ayelet Ben-Yishai calls it “a dialectic of representation” (195). She sheds light on the radical critique of representation that the novel “is a reified abstraction of men's domination of women; its failure to be represented reveals its abstraction and thus harbors its own critique (213). Vijaya Mishra chooses to entitle his essay in a typical Hindi way of colloquial speaking, “Rushdie-Wushdie: Salman Rushdie's Hobson-Jobson,” where Rushdie experiments with linguistic usages: “Rushdie's linguistic experimentation is at one a compulsive return to a hobson-jobson, a recognition of a colonial inheritance, as well as a transcendence over it” (407). Finally, in

“Reconstructing *Midnight’s Children* and *Shame*,” James Harrison views “Rushdie sees such art, when hard won and aware of its limitations, as hearteningly or terrifyingly meaningful, and not at all absurd in relation to life as possessing, at its best, ‘the authentic taste of truth’ and issuing in ‘acts of love’” (410). In this way, *Shame* has been critiqued from different perspectives and standpoints. Some of which are informed by feminist standpoints, while others are literary analyses. The main point of the argument has been political turmoil in Pakistan, which raises issues concerning the nation, politics, and the nation-state.

Despite extensive studies on *Shame*, scant attention has been paid to shame’s role as a central mediating force that transforms personal identity into collective national character. Most attention has focused on *Shame* as Rushdie’s political satire or psychological condition in the postcolonial world; the function of shame in creating fragmentation, hybridity, and ambivalence has not yet been explained. Similarly, while Rushdie’s representation in *Shame* has been widely discussed, insufficient attention has been paid to how shame operates as a discursive and affective force that exposes the contradictions of postcolonial nation building and produces hybrid national identities. Without examining this relationship, the significance of shame in connecting private experiences with public history remains only partially understood, and these three questions aim to explain it. First, how does Rushdie transform shame from an individual emotion into a collective discourse of national identity in the novel? Second, how do characters such as Bilquis Hyder, Omer Khayam Sakil, and Sufiya Zinobia embody hybrid identities that reveal the instability of postcolonial Pakistan? Finally, how does Homi K. Bhabha’s concept of hybridity and Third Space explain the relationship between shame and the fragmented construction of national identity in *Shame*?

Similarly, the objectives of this research are to examine how shame functions as a mediatory force between the individual and the collective. It analyzes Rushdie’s presentation of ambivalence and hybridity through major characters whose presence challenges the notions of nationhood. Furthermore, this article demonstrates how shame exposes the contradictions of postcolonial nation building in Pakistan through Bhabha’s concept of hybridity, ambivalence, and the Third Space.

Methodology

The research design used in this article is a qualitative analysis grounded in postcolonial literary criticism. It employs a close reading of Rushdie’s *Shame* to expose the role of shame in the construction of postcolonial national identity. The article understands shame as a social effect that circulates between bodies and institutions rather than an interior psychological state. As a result, as an individual has a role to perform, Sara Ahmed argues “individuals become implicated in national shame in so far as they already belong to the nation” (102). Thus, characters’ shame in the novel becomes an affective force that exceeds individual experiences and becomes constitutive of national identity: “By witnessing what is shameful about the past, the nation can’t live up to the ideals that secure its identity or being in the present” (109); it needs to get over it.

Postcolonial National Identity and Bhabha’s Third Space

In *The Location of Culture* (1994), Bhabha articulates three interconnected concepts—hybridity, ambivalence, and the Third Space—as the characters of the nation. Moreover, the idea that the nation as narration and the performative construction of the national identity are central to the character of postcolonial nationhood. For him, the construction of national identity is based on “The tension between the performative and pedagogical is twofold: pedagogical and the performative” (209). For him, the pedagogical mode makes the nation a historical object passed down through generations via institutions, texts, and traditions. On the other hand, the performative refers to the daily practices, speeches, and cultural expressions that define a nation. These performances give way to a fragmented, contingent, and hybrid nature of national identity. The interplay and tension between these two modes is at the heart of national identity. The pedagogical mode helps to frame and legitimize, while the performative disrupts and redefines it. This tension reveals an ambivalent nature of national identity. In short, these two forces, together, demonstrate that the nation is both imagined and enacted; it is also both historical and

In “Dissemination: Time, narrative and the margin of modern nation,” Bhabha explains the nation as “a time of gathering” (*Location* 199). Such gatherings are the “gathering of people in the diaspora” that is structured “around temporality rather than *about* historicity” (200, emphasis original). In other words, Bhabha proposes that the nation is a “cultural construction” which is “a form of social and textual affiliation” (201). In this sense, the nation undergoes “the complex strategies of cultural identification and discursive address that function in the name of ‘the people’ or ‘the nation’ and make them the immanent subjects of a range of social and literary narrative” (201). Yet, the space of people in this narrative of nation is “neither the beginning nor the end” (209) rather is a constant negotiation. It is because, “nations like narratives lose their origins in the myths of time” (Bhabha, *Nation* 1) and conflicting stories of its origin.

Bhabha explains that postcolonial identities are the construction of cultural negotiation and continual transformation. He argues that colonial power has “its shifting forces and fixities” (*Location* 159). In other words, it is the “reevaluation of the assumption of the colonial authority through the repetition of discriminating identity” (159). For him, postcolonial identities develop through the ongoing blending of colonizers’ influences with local and native cultures. The postcolonial nations have grappled with the idea of nation-building. It means hybridity and cultural identity are deeply intertwined, especially in postcolonial and diasporic contexts, where individuals navigate multiple cultural influences. Bhabha describes hybridity as the “third space,” a site of cultural negotiation where “new signs of identity” emerge, resisting fixed definitions (277). This blending of cultural elements can be enriching, allowing individuals to draw from diverse traditions, languages, and worldviews. However, hybridity can also be a source of tension, as individuals may feel caught between cultures, never fully belonging to either. The negotiation of identity within hybrid spaces challenges rigid notions of nationality, ethnicity, and tradition, often leading to the creation of dynamic, evolving identities that resist easy categorization.

While hybridity can provide a sense of flexibility and adaptability, it can also lead to internal conflicts when external pressures demand assimilation or loyalty to a single cultural identity. Literature, art, and personal stories often explore this tension by depicting characters and individuals who struggle with or embrace their hybrid lives. Ultimately, hybridity challenges the idea that cultural identity must be pure or singular, instead emphasizing how cultures evolve through interaction, adaptation, and reinterpretation. Bhabha concurs, “colonial hybrid is the articulation of the ambivalent space where the role of power is enacted on the site of desire, making its objects at once disciplinary and dissimilatory” (166). And the colonial presence is always ambivalent and is always split between its appearance as original and authoritative and its articulation as repetition as difference” (153).

Among these critical concepts and theoretical explorations, this article uses Homi Bhabha’s concept of identity formation in the third space, as explained in *The Location of Culture*, as a theoretical tool to examine the process of nationhood in Post-War Pakistan as outlined by Rushdie in *Shame*. The application of Bhabha’s concept of the third space provides a powerful framework for analyzing identity, hybridity, and cultural negotiation in *Shame*. The third space, according to Bhabha, is a liminal zone where cultural interactions create new meanings and identities, disrupting fixed binaries such as colonizer/colonized or self/other.

Fragmented Identities and the Nation’s Body

Rushdie constructs the female body as the primary site upon which the nation inscribes collective shame, revealing that patriarchal expectations transform women’s private experiences into symbols of national identity. In other words, the female characters and their bodies become “the shame of the nation” (Rushdie 12) for not being able to give birth to a child, for bringing a firstborn but a girl, and bringing a disabled one. Similarly, the women are subject to shame for losing husbands to some white women. Thus, “When Rani [Harappa] gave birth to a daughter, her failure to produce a male child offered Bilquis a little consolation” (84). This becomes a consolation because it is exactly like Duniyazad Begum tells Bilquis in an insult: “This disgrace of your barrenness, Madam [Bilquis] is not yours alone. Don’t you know that shame is collective? The shame of one of us sits on us all and bends our back” (84). This is too much to take for Bilquis, and both start fighting “soundlessly” (84).

The bearer of shame, later in the night, gets permission from Bariamma to leave “this zoo” so she won’t have to “do [it], like animals or what” (85) in the presence of other spectators. When you leave this house, your shame leaves with you, and our dear Duniya, whom you attacked for speaking the truth, will sleep more easily” (85).

The experience of Rani Harappa exhibits that national identity is produced by competing narratives that expose the instability and ambivalence of the postcolonial nation. Nation, according to Bhabha, “becomes a liminal signifying space that is *internally* marked by the discourses of minorities, the heterogeneous histories of contending peoples, antagonistic authorities and tense locations of cultural difference” (212). In other words, a nation is also a performative notion. Thus, the female characters—particularly Sufiya Zinobia, Rani Harappa, Naveed Hyder, and even Arjumand Harappa embody the ambivalence in Pakistan’s identity as a nation. If a nation is a contested location, as claimed by Bhabha, Rani Harappa’s weaving of woolen shawls during the “house arrest for six years” (Rushdie 188) with her daughter, “at Mohenjo of a small canvas mountain-range of Army tents” (188) marks her conspicuously low-profile life. Yet, it has narrative significance when she sends those shawls as gifts to her daughter, later, when she becomes an important person. In those shawls, then only, the political message becomes clear. The message is about her husband, whom her daughter worshipped as a saint, but she challenges these views, which stand at odds with his popular image.

[Y]es, I know, you have made a saint of him, my daughter, you swallowed everything he dished out, his abstinence, his celibacy of an Oriental Pope, but he could not do without for long, that man of pleasure masquerading as a servant of Duty, . . . but I knew him, . . . I saw the white girls in the village swell and pop, I knew about them small but regular donations he sent to them. Harappa children must not starve, and after he fell they came to me. (192 emphasis original)

Rani Harappa used the name Rani Humayun, which, according to the narrator, is “her own name, retrieved from the mothballs of the past” (191), a counter memory to the existing narrative about Iskander Harappa as a martyr. This memory is a retaliation for the shame she carried for not being able to give a son.

Rani Harappa becomes an embodiment of ambivalence between modernity and history as her inability to give a son makes her the carrier of a collective shame. In Bhabha’s concept, therefore, the hybridity stands as the unassimilated element that destabilizes authority. He argues, “The social articulation of difference, from the minority perspective, is a complex, ongoing negotiation that seeks to authorize cultural hybridity that emerges in moments of historical transformation” (Rushdie 4). Her accounts, collected in the form of woolen shawls, are these moments and performative testimonies of Pakistan’s promise to transform into a democratic nation. As envisioned by Iskander Harappa, the country expects a historical transformation, but what it gets in reality is a mockery of the ideals. Thus, in “Shawl of International Shame,” she has given an account of how undemocratic Harappa had been in his life: “his hands around her throat, squeezing Democracy’s gullet, while her eyes bulged, her face turned blue, her tongue protruded” (194). In other words, he effectively killed the hope of democracy in Pakistan. Thus, the slogan for democracy was a shame. Furthermore, the same fate is with Sufiya. She is also an embodied form of uncontrollable excess that disrupts both patriarchal and national unity. Her birth, as the narrator has marked, “grew out of the corpse of that murdered girl [who] . . . became a ghost” (116). She becomes a girl with a beast inside. Rushdie’s narrator calls her a girl within a beast inside, and later in the narrative, she ultimately turns out to be a “white panther” (257). The juxtaposition of a new myth of Iskander Harappa as a martyr and the beast wreaking havoc highlights the ironic nature of the nation-state. This ambivalence is most tellingly displayed in Hayder’s thoughts: “Secretly, however, he was aghast at this latest proof of his helplessness to resist his daughter. It seemed to him once again that the years of his greatness and of the construction of the great edifice of national stability had been no more than self-delusory lies, that this nemesis had been stalking him all along permitting him [to] rise higher and higher so that his fall might be greater” (257). Sufiya Zinobia, nicknamed ‘shame,’ is in fact “Shame personified . . . who is at the center of that marriage between shame and shamelessness which . . . breeds the all-enveloping violence” (Ahmad 1467). She has been a destabilizer and a force to reckon with not only for her father but also

for the whole process of nation-building. In other words, she represents two aspects of the Pakistan nation represented by her father and Iskander Harappa.

Sufiya Zinobia's transformation from an innocent victim to a monstrous figure illustrates how suppressed shame erupts as a political and violent force. Despite the Nation being understood either as state power or a radical memory that gives rise to a counter force, which Bhabha calls "the politics of differences" (3). Such oppositions "assign new meanings and different directions to the process of historical change" (3). Her transformation from a docile, "simple-minded" woman into a violent one is explained by the narrator, who notes that "Humiliate people for long enough and a wilderness burst out of them" (117). Sufiya Zinobia is a primary example of it. Her transformation from an obedient, "simple-minded" woman into a violent, monstrous avenger reflects the nation's own repressed rage and fractured self.

Rushdie portrays political leadership as an act of mimicry in which the performance of modern statehood conceals authoritarianism and exposes the fragility of national identity. Another fundamental nature of the state as a body can be understood as mimicry and power. Lawrence Ziring calls "the political history of Pakistan" the theatricality of "the Pakistan drama" (931). The ruling elites in *Shame*—figures like Raza Hyder and Iskander Harappa—mimic Westernized modernity while reproducing authoritarian structures. Bhabha's "mimic man" framework helps expose how imitation becomes both a tool of power and a site of mockery. The narrator opens the mockery of these two leaders as a "high time [for] the combatant took the field" (Rushdie 104) to win Pinkie Aurangzeb, who is the young wife of Marshal Aurangzeb, Joint Chief of Staff. The narrator describes it as a "duel which was to continue at least until both protagonists were dead, if not longer" (105). Modelled on the medieval knights fighting for their honor or a warrior deciding the battle outcome by combat to the death, Iskandar Harappa and Raza Hyder are ready to duel for someone else's wife. In this ironic reversal, the "low mimetic literary effects [of] mimicry emerge as one of the most elusive and effective strategies of colonial power and knowledge" (Bhabha 122) that grinds both characters at the center of conflict in Pakistan.

The ideological conflict between religion and secular politics reveals Pakistan's nationhood as a contested and fragmented cultural project. The mockery of a new nation is best exemplified in the intrusive narrator's comment on the nation's ambivalence with religion and modernity, represented by two warriors—Hayder and Harappa. Hyder stands for the devout religious foundation of the nation, which goes with Bhabha's notion of the nation as a pedagogical concept of a nation. Thus, the narrative extends its arguments into an investigation of the role of religion as a founding principle for a state" (Stadtler 4). On the other hand, the liminal position of the narrator also undermines the concept of the nation as a unified cultural idea as opposing factions of military and religious institutions vie for the power: God came down to Pakistan . . . [and] asked General Ayub Khan why the place was in such a mess." Ayub accused the politicians of being corrupt and "God eliminated the politicians". However, "things were even worse than before" (Rushdie 112) and Ayub faced the music. The contradiction of Pakistan as a nation has been a blame game between each other: politicians and religious, civilians and military, peripheral and center. Although it is a joke, Rushdie's narrator is pinpointedly right in understanding the bickering political culture in Pakistan: "Pakistan has changed over the past twenty-five years, and its party system has not yet adjusted to the changes" (Tepper 63). In this context, the changes and reformations gave grounds for Zulikar Ali Bhutto and his party Pakistan People's Party (PPP), enough strength to challenge "the politically inert system of Ayub Khan" (63). Mr. Bhutto did well, too. However, due to the contradictions within, such as "Jinnah's creation [of] a variegated pattern of sub-units" (64), princely states have been a constant problem in state-building. On the other hand, the promise of the Islamic Republic contradicts Bhutto's Islamist Socialism. In short, the concept and reality of the nation-state race in a musical chair-like game between democratic promises and military rule.

The novel further undermines the myth of a unified nation by exposing the contradictions between Pakistan's religious foundations and its democratic aspirations. The narrator toys with the founding principle of the Pakistani nation-state and its "travails as an independent state have been marked by perennial controversies about its ideological foundations" (Ahmed 13). On the one hand, it

is Iskandar Harappa's new nation politics, and on the other, Hayder's idea of the Islamic Republic collides to invite gods to intervene in the national politics. The situation is ripe for the narrator's jibe: "On His third visit, He found a catastrophe, so He agreed with Zulfikar Ali Bhutto that democracy must return. He turned Yahya into a cockroach . . . but, a few years later, he noticed the situation was still pretty awful" (Rushdie 112). In the fateful cycle of military rule, finally God, too, turned to "General Zia and offered his supreme power" the condition of making people love God's name. In the lack of stable political culture and the ubiquitous "Polarized politics," as Nasreen Akhtar observes, "is having an immense impact on the Pakistani nation and it has been posing security threats" (31). And at the center of this polarization lies religion: the "role of religion as a founding principle for a state" (31) makes the novel a historical narrative.

Raza Hayder's humiliating downfall demonstrates how political authority ultimately collapses under the very structures of shame and performance that once substituted it. Mockery comes as an ironic reversal for Raza Hayder: his fall came "in chaos; in women's clothing; in black" veil-dressed as a woman "they pass through the mob and ring of soldiers, jeeps, trucks" (Rushdie 262). Hyder, the sitting president of the country, flees dressed like a woman. This was his shame of travelling "bumping on buses, cowering in the shadows of bus stations, they head south and west" (267). The powerful president has been reduced to a "hijara bottoms" (268). The all-powerful leader of the nation is reduced to a transvestite running away for his life. There is another ironic reversal waiting for him: he has been killed by three sisters. Thus, the narrative serves poetic justice.

Ultimately, Rushdie presents Pakistan as a hybrid and fragmented nation whose identity emerges through continual negotiation rather than cultural purity or political unity. Finally, the mentioned hybridity collectively makes Pakistan's identity as a nation. As Bhabha explains, the "complex strategies of cultural identification and discursive address that function in the name of 'the people' or 'the nation' and make them the immanent subjects of a range of social and literary narratives" (201) Rushdie's 'not quite Pakistan' fictional space mirrors Bhabha's idea that nations are discursively constructed, caught between imitation of colonial models and the search for authenticity. In the opening of the novel, the narrator describes a town that resembles Pakistan, but without mentioning the name: "In the remote border town of Q., which when seen from the air resembles nothing so much as an ill-proportioned dumb-bell" (Rushdie 11). Though the narrator refuses to give a name or an indication of the setting of his story, readers know it as Postcolonial Pakistan.

Conclusion

Rushdie's narrative in *Shame* emerges as a meditation on how the intertwined forces of shame, hybridity, and postcolonial identity shape both individuals and the nation-state of Pakistan. As a result, the concept of Pakistan as a cultural state fails due to ambivalence that is inherent in the political and cultural sinew of Pakistan. In his narrative, Rushdie employs a fragmented narrative, an intrusive narrator who frequently rejects his knowledge about the story, and characters whose lives unfold at the intersection of personal trauma and collective history to expose the deep fissures within a nation that appears to be struggling to negotiate its unstable cultural foundations. At the center of this struggle lies shame that operates in the novel not merely as an emotion but as a structuring principle. Thus, in the novel, shame governs familial relationships, gender roles, political authority, and national self-definition. It circulates between private and public spheres, moving from the domestic domain to the highest offices of power, and ultimately shaping the imagined community of the nation itself.

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