

Fragmented Realities in Salman Rushdie's *Shame*

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And there are so many stories to tell, too many, such an excess of intertwined lives events miracles places rumors, so dense a commingling of the improbable and the mundane! I have been a swallower of lives; and to know me, just the one of me, you'll have to swallow the lot as well. (Midnight's Children 4)

Salman Rushdie makes no apologies for the complexity of his texts. Undertaking any analytical approach to his work involves a process of unraveling, only to find that the recurrent themes are all interrelated and dependent upon one another. Throughout the process of unraveling one must remember "to swallow the lot as well". Rushdie is a teller of stories. His novels are an amalgam of political and social satire, internal identity struggle and a reinterpretation of historical events. As Rushdie says in *Midnight's Children* the stories are a "dense commingling of the improbable and the mundane." The same can be said for the novel *Shame*.

Shame follows the tumultuous paths of two families, the Harappa's and the Hyder's, in the newly partitioned Pakistan. Most of the central characters are based upon true political figures, but as the story progresses it becomes evident that the power struggles are actually between the fictional characters Omar Shakil and Sufiya Zinobia, and their relationship with the self-reflexive narrator. Sufiya is a feeble, brain-damaged child of the Hyder's and Omar is named by the narrator as the "peripheral hero" of the story. Omar is a doctor and many years older than Sufiya, but he eventually marries her in order to gain control over her shame which has manifested as a dangerous and deadly fury. Rushdie uses magical realism in his text to show the embodiment of shame within Sufiya. This technique inserts magical situations into a setting which is otherwise quite normal. Sufiya evolves into a sacrificial character who takes the shame of society upon herself. The shame is then transformed into a deadly magical power. Although Sufiya is physically incapable of harming anyone, her rage results in many deaths and torments her family and community. Sufiya remains oblivious to the crimes that she has committed. Omar's marriage to Sufiya appears to be out of goodwill but is actually an assertion of control and power over her. Omar attempts to remove the evidence of Sufiya's shame in the same manner that he has removed it from his own life, by ignoring it, but shame triumphs over Omar in the end. He is decapitated, as are Sufiya's other victims. In

the book's final moment all that is left of Omar is a, "giant, grey and headless man, a figure of dreams, a phantom with one arm lifted in gesture of farewell" (305).

This is only the surface of Rushdie's "palimpsest" tale. There are multiple layers to the text, all of which work towards the common goal of rejecting a single focus within any story. Rushdie uses postmodern techniques to create an overall sense of discomfort for the reader who never knows if there is any truth. The visibility of the authorial role in the text is one of the primary layers to be considered. It demands an exploration of the social and political hierarchies which serve as controlling forces in the author's creation. This vision of authorship is similar to that of Michel Foucault who claims that:

The 'author-function' is tied to the legal and institutional systems that circumscribe, determine and articulate the realm of discourses; it does not appear in any uniform manner in all discourses, at all times, and in any given culture; it is not defined by spontaneous attribution of a text to its creator, but through a series of precise and complex procedures; it does not refer purely and simply, to an actual individual insofar as it simultaneously gives rise to a variety of egos and a series of subjective positions that individuals of any class may come to occupy (24).

Gary Gutting explains that Foucault is exploring the identity of the author and questioning whether an author can be held responsible for the text. Salman Rushdie raises similar concerns in *Shame*. He is an author who is in conflict with the reconciliation of the subject and subjected within his narratives. His stories are biased, just as the histories they recount. Rushdie struggles with the acceptance of a history which has been edited. *Shame* is representative of the struggle to understand the storyteller's role and their relationship to history, as well as an attempt to recognize the responsibility that the author has for the text.

Throughout this paper I hope to explore the notion of the tyrannical author who is trying to separate himself from the "fairy stories" and how he struggles with the role of subject and subjected. Through establishing the narrator's role within the story, and primarily with the character Sufiya Zinobia I hope to refute the claims made by critics which suggest that Rushdie is promoting the myths of subjection through the retelling of his fragmented stories. Furthermore I hope to establish that through Sufiya

Zinobia the author acknowledges that the present historical realities are the only truths which exist. But alas, as the narrator asks so many times throughout the text, “Who is Sufiya Zinobia?” The process of discovering Sufiya Zinobia will be no less daunting throughout this endeavor, than it is in the novel. There are multiple layers of stories which need to be unearthed before hers can emerge. Sufiya will be discovered—somewhere—amidst a broad discussion of postcolonial identity politics, postmodern representations of identity and the belief that Sufiya herself is a hindrance to the feminist project. First let us turn to the text for a clear representation of the problem the narrator has with the nature of storytelling.

Storytelling is a prevalent theme in Rushdie’s novels, and it adds to the complex layers of his postmodern text. Rushdie illustrates the problem of storytelling through Sufiya’s ‘soon-to-be’ mother Bilquis. When Bilquis first marries Raza Hyder, she lives with his extended family in “the old village way”. The women all live together while their husbands are away working. In order for Bilquis’ new extended family to accept her, her mother-in-law explains that, “you must know our things and tell us yours” (74). By offering the story of her past, Bilquis hands it to them with the understanding that, “the telling of tales proved the family’s ability to survive them, to remain in spite of everything, its grip on its honor and its unswerving moral code” (74). Her stories were altered, when necessary, to “maintain the grip on honor”. They were changed to reflect what they *should* be (according to...?). This is a major concern of the Narrator, and accounts for the relentless self-reflexivity in his text. He ceaselessly offers alternate possibilities and insights into the “ways” that his characters defend their honor and remove the possibility of shame from their narrative. The Narrator is exploring the true manifestation of the roots of the family. He explains, “... stories, such stories, were the glue that held the clan together, binding the generations in webs of whispered secrets. Her story altered, at first, in the retellings, but finally it settled down, and after that nobody, neither teller nor listener, would tolerate any deviation from the hallowed, sacred text” (74). The irony is that there is nothing sacred about the text. It was told in one way and then it was passed on through different hands over time. It was edited where the teller saw most fit. Through the exploration of the myth of roots “Truth” begins to emerge. Rushdie’s Narrator brings to the surface the other stories that are not always told. Ultimately, many critics disagree as to whether or not his

postmodern project is successful. But the alternate stories offered by the narrator give readers insights which lead to a deeper understanding of this rich text.

The stories in the text, for the sake of simplicity can be separated into two categories: the plot (the fairy story), and the subplot (the nagging voice of the self-reflexive narrator). As the story progresses, the struggle to gain an understanding of truth takes precedent over the plot and the subplot offers an escape from the traditional story. Throughout the text Rushdie asks his readers to explore the paradigms which shape their understanding of truth. Through the telling of the two incongruous stories, Rushdie is exploring what scholars such as Timothy Brennan refers to as “the myth of the nation”. Joel Kittouri and Stephen Morton also discuss the concept of myth as a means of identity formation. Morton explains that Rushdie sees the production of postcolonial identity as being a “fictional composite” of traditional and modern views. Through the exploration of history as a societal construct, Rushdie probes for a deeper understanding of the dominant paradigms which have shaped his own perceptions. The incongruity of the stories presented, is emblematic of multiple power struggles. These struggles are evidenced through the subconscious drive of Rushdie’s narrator to present a truthful story, and simultaneously continue to tell the one with which he is the most comfortable. He cannot deviate from the “hallowed sacred text” yet he does, repeatedly. Ultimately these deviations have led to the questioning of Rushdie’s storytelling.

Many critics have struggled with Rushdie’s postmodern retelling of history for a variety of reasons. These reasons include Rushdie’s “Indian-ness” and his place in the counter canon, the ‘ambivalent’ authorship that Rushdie employs, and the gendered subjection of Rushdie’s characters. It would be an injustice to analyze his work without undertaking the project—in its entirety. As acknowledged by the narrator of *MC* “I have been a swallower of lives; and to know me, just one of me, you’ll have to swallow the lot as well”. In order to swallow a piece of the lot we must examine the role of history in its present state and the problems that this raises for readers and critics of his texts.

Rushdie’s literature is often viewed as being counter-canonical because it does not reflect a cohesive national identity, but rather questions the very nature of identity through the rewriting of national history. Rushdie’s fragmented post-modern narrative technique is a crucial aspect of the

“palimpsest” picture that he wants to present, but many critics find this fragmentation quite problematic. Richard Lane turns to Homi Bhabba when he discusses the cultural impact of Rushdie’s works. Bhabba concisely asserts that, “Hybridity is Heresy” (17). This assertion is demonstrative of the clash between ideological conviction and the fragmented questioning of the nature of Truth. Other critics such as Ahmad Aijaz and Joan Scott discuss Rushdie’s fragmented style and its effectiveness in his works. Aijaz claims that Rushdie’s “obsessive digressions and the telling of an interminable tale” are derived from classic Indian stories such as the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharat*. However, Aijaz finds Rushdie’s fragmented view problematic and that the, “idea of belonging is itself seen now as bad faith, a mere ‘myth of origins’ a truth effect produced by the Enlightenment’s ‘metaphysic of presence’. The Truth of being, to the extent that Truth is possible, resides now in multiplicity of subject positions and an excess of belonging” (1461). Aijaz suggests that Rushdie’s style produces a lack of truth, and that in order for a truth to exist one must be the subject (the teller of stories, I would argue). This is precisely the problem that Rushdie is struggling with, and he expresses this throughout the text of *Shame*. If Rushdie’s work is viewed as being a personal exploration and project of growth, rather than a message to “the nation” (western or non-western) the power within his literature will become much clearer. His plot creates the stage from which the true story can be told. A reevaluation of history is necessary. His representation of the “myth of the nation” is a means of recognizing what impedes his growth—what hierarchies exist within him—as a teller of stories. Simultaneously he suggests that a national history cannot be founded upon a false identity, as evidenced through the story of Bilquis. The reliance upon history to unearth identity is possible only if there is certainty on which the history was founded. For Rushdie, any certainty must be challenged. As he states in an interview with Bill Moyer, “One of the things a writer can do is to say: Here is the way in which you’re told you’re supposed to look at the world, but actually there are also some other ways. Let us never believe that the way in which people in power tell us to look at the world is the only way we can look, because if we do that, then that’s a kind of appalling self-censorship” (4). This philosophy is one which is clearly expressed in all of Rushdie’s works and certainly in *Shame*.

The struggle for truth is evidenced through the narrator's obvious unreliability and through the lack of control that the narrator has over what stories will finally emerge. Rushdie's post-modern fragmented fantasy world is not an excess of belongings; it allows readers to visualize the alternate states of reality present in the text—and the world surrounding them. Through fantasy, Rushdie is able to reject normative views of how history has progressed, and is progressing. Joan Scott discusses the retelling of history as fantasy (or as Aijaz might view it, the 'excess of belongings') and utilizes what she refers to as "Fantasy Echo" to support Foucault's vision authorship. She says, "Fantasy is the means by which real relations of identity between past and present are discovered and/or forged. Fantasy is more or less synonymous with imagination and it is taken to be subject or rational, intentional control; one's direct imagination purposively to achieve a coherent aim, that of writing oneself or one's group into history, writing the history of individuals or groups" (287). Scott believes that fantasy is not a subjection of the other but rather that it "enables individuals and groups to give themselves histories". Scott and Aijaz offer differing opinions on the nature of storytelling and the author as being the ultimate subject.

The position of the author as the subject is the crux of Rushdie's necessity for exploration. The Narrator highlights this exploration telling a story about a country that is not "Pakistan, or not quite". The narrator explains that, "There are two countries, real and fictional, occupying the same space. My story, my fictional country exists, like myself, at a slight angle to reality. I have found this off-centering to be necessary; but its value is, of course, open to debate. My view is that I am not writing only about Pakistan (22). Rushdie frequently uses the narrator's voice to defend his message. His defense is so convincing that it seems that Rushdie's narrator could be speaking directly to the critics who question his methods of creation. He acknowledges the "off-centering" as necessity, because of the inevitability of the "missing bits". So he chooses to tell many stories, and question each of them. Throughout *Shame* readers will be introduced to multiple stories, all of which are necessary to the whole. But their alternate states of existence are constantly questioned.

In *Shame* Rushdie has presented a fictional country that is based on Pakistan—but it is also Pakistan. Some authors use obscure metaphors in their fiction writing so that readers may participate in a

journey of discovery. Many of Rushdie's metaphors are far from obscure. He insists that readers reevaluate what they have already known to be true. This adds to the critical attacks surrounding his work and consequently, to the defensive tone of the narrators question in *Shame*, "Who commandeered the job of rewriting history?" (86) The novel itself is a rewriting of history, and many critics struggle with whose history Rushdie is telling. Rushdie is writing as a "duel immigrant". His narrator lives in London he and is telling the story of a "country that is not Pakistan—or not quite," because he does not know if *he* has the right to tell the stories. His ambiguous authorship becomes problematic and many critics wonder what perspective he is writing from. Aparna Mahanta discusses this problem in "Allegories of the Indian Experience." Mahanta bluntly states that, "Rushdie's novels are not for the ordinary Indian. In the first place Indians don't figure in these novels, except as that familiar sea of dark faces, the sea of humanity beating against the ubiquitous citadel's of the white man's presence" (244). This highlights the problem of Rushdie's inclusion in the canon of postcolonial literature as well as the problem of ambivalent authorship. The author's questioning of all Truths rejects a cohesive national identity and establishes his work as "counter-canonical". As a member of this counter-canon Rushdie is on the outside again, and his status as the teller of stories is questioned because he is viewed as a member of the western world looking back at his homeland. The counter-canon does not exist only in the realm of literary criticism. Rushdie's relentless questioning of Truth extends outward to the problems of the postcolonial nation and his responsibility as the subject and/or the subjected.

Aime Cesaire addresses this view of "the other" in a book entitled *Discourse on Colonialism*. He writes, "The only history is white...the only ethnography is white. It is the West that studies the ethnography of the others, not the others who study the ethnography of the West" (54). Although Cesaire's book was published in 1972 when much of the world was politically controlled by Western powers, the postcolonial nation still suffers beneath the weight of its former colonized state of being. There is still a fear of the "ubiquitous white man's presence". Some believe that Rushdie's counter canonical style is reinforcing the patriarchal control, and that his retelling of history is a promulgation of the myth rather than a criticism of it. However, Rushdie's self-reflexive narrator tells the stories of "the

other,” he allows room for these stories to emerge. The narrator’s story necessitates the Truth of the subplot over the plot, or “the other” over the West. The narrator is emblematic of the author’s struggle to uncover an identity that is unimpeded by the dominant beliefs and myths which have distorted a solid perception of reality.

Rushdie’s fragmented narration is the only way he can present a cohesive picture. It encapsulates the complex identity issues (of the nation and the self) that are dealt with in his texts. His postmodern techniques allow him to question the confines of an historical past and its effect on the present realities. Kathryn Hume defends Rushdie’s postmodern perceptions of Truth in her article “Taking a Stand While Lacking a Center: Rushdie’s Postmodern Politics” she asserts that “Rushdie is fascinated and appalled by tyrants and tyranny, and has been from the start of his career. As a postmodern writer, however, he finds effective action against tyrants difficult to conceive” (209-210). She goes on to say that “Postmodern humanity is decentered: how can it take a firm stand against tyranny if decentering removes any solid basis for belief in ethics and political position?” So while Rushdie urges his readers to question reality, he must simultaneously acknowledge that he has no solid ground to stand on. Furthermore he must deal with the issue of the tyrant as one which may exist within himself as “re-shaper” and teller of stories. The story of Bilquis was reshaped by other characters who insisted upon a falsely created narrative, but the creation of stories affects the narrator also. Hume points to an extremely effective moment in *Shame* when the narrator explains, “Well, well, I mustn't forget I'm only telling a fairy-story. My dictator will be toppled by goblinish, faerie means. "Makes it pretty easy for you," is the obvious criticism; and I agree, I agree. But add, even if it does sound a little peevisish: 'You try and get rid of a dictator some time'" (210). Rushdie’s narrator is defending his storytelling method as well as the author, who has been assigned the role of “subject” (by himself? or by history? or by readers?). It is not known who assigned these roles, but it is waiting to be uncovered, somewhere beneath the palimpsest tale. Dictatorship and tyranny are central to the political struggles illustrated within the “fairy story,” but the multiple levels of involvement between the narrator of the text and the teller of the story forces readers to question how many dictators are present. Nonetheless the narrator tells readers the story—as he should.

Shame's "fairy story" is the story of two families the Hyders, and the Harappa's. The heads of household are based on the Pakistani political leaders Zulfikar Ali Bhutto (Iskander Harappa) and his predecessor General Muhammad Zia-al-Haq (Raza Hyder). The turmoil surrounding these two political leaders is also analogous to the critical conversation surrounding most of Rushdie's work. Bhutto represented the modern ideals of democracy and socialism. The General, who had Bhutto executed after overthrowing his leadership, advanced the Islamization of Pakistan and established a more centrally controlled government. The two men represent the clash between intellectual modernism and the adherence to ideological convictions. Both men are equally destructive to their families and themselves. Iskander Harappa engages in debauchery and infidelity throughout the text while insisting on a new country and promoting science and "modern thought". Raza Hyder turns his back on anything that is not a part of the image of nationalism that he promotes. This clash is central to the Bhabba's assertion that, "Hybridity is heresy" and it brings to surface the complex issues surrounding identity formation.

Rushdie's retelling of history is more than a question of excessive myth or productive decentering. It delves into the deepest aspects of human nature and the formation of identity, the larger questions that many do not want to address. Scholars such as Edward Said and Etienne Balibar explore the complex relationship between identity and nationalism. Said explains:

Memory and its representations touch very significantly upon questions of identity, nationalism, of power and authority. Far from being a neutral exercise in facts and basic truths the study of history, which is of course the underpinning of memory...is to some considerable extent a nationalist effort premised on the need to construct a desirable loyalty to the insider's understanding of one's country, tradition and faith (176).

So on many levels, Rushdie's postmodern retelling of history becomes more than creative literary technique. The crux of his work lies in the nature of identity formation. The suggestion that identity formation is based upon a myth of nationhood is not easily accepted by the subject promoting the "myths" or by the subjected who is searching for identity. Rushdie's "fairy tale" characters reflect the levels of identity formation. Iskander Harappa represents the struggle to move forward to a new concept of

identity, whereas Raza Hyder wants to maintain (or create?) a place where identity can find solid ground. At the stories' end, both men are dead, and they are both responsible for the destructive paths they pursued. Modernism does not reign as the harbinger of Truth.

This clash of ideological conviction and intellectual modernism was exposed to larger audiences upon the release of the notorious novel *The Satanic Verses*. Sara Mainland says that *The Satanic Verses* resulted in Rushdie being "handcuffed to history with a price on his head"(1). Ironically the tyrant "history," does keep him handcuffed and submissive, even fearful of his life. Because of the fragmented stories which serve as metaphors, *Shame* could be considered the blasphemous predecessor of the notorious novel, but it is much less controversial on the surface. Although Rushdie uses postmodern techniques to create an incredibly cynical environment, it is less offensive than a rewriting of the Qu'ran. But both novels are questioning the power history has in forming our present realities. Ultimately, one could hope that as the myth of the control of history over present reality floats away there is room for something else to emerge, and it becomes evident throughout the text that the story which should be told is the story of the women. The oppression of the postcolonial nation as a whole is evidenced through the emergence of these stories, and Rushdie's narrator recognizes the importance of telling them:

I hope it goes without saying that not all women are crushed by any system, no matter how oppressive. It is commonly and, I believe, accurately said of Pakistan that her women are much more impressive than her men...their chains, nevertheless, are no fictions. They exist. And they are getting heavier. *If you hold down one thing you hold down the adjoining*. In the end, though, it all blows up in your face (181).

Although the narrator expresses the desire to explore female subjectivity, many critics have debated whether the author was successful in his illustration of the feminine.

The representation of the women in *Shame* is discussed frequently among scholars. Some critics claim that Rushdie portrays an empowering female; others believe his female characters are stereotypical and counterproductive to the feminist project. Nearly all of the criticism involves Rushdie's postmodern style of writing. It assesses its effectiveness in promoting feminism, just as it has been used to determine

his perceptions of postcolonial identity formation. The two are certainly not mutually exclusive. His stylistic endeavors inform the ways in which his texts are read. In Marguerite Alexander's book, *Flights from Realism*, she argues that Rushdie's attempts at refiguring the commonly accepted stories are incredibly important because they offer numerous views of history and provide a place for those who previously had no voice. She says this is because "there is a greater awareness of the unreliability of all narratives, whether purporting to be fact or fiction, and a corresponding impulse to expose the process by which narratives are made. They share an unwillingness to attribute too much to individuals, but instead examine the forces which shape the terms of individual action" (127). Alexander's assertion is that the postmodern project offers new voices to an old construction of history. But some feminist critics disagree with Rushdie's fantasy world; they believe that because it is not grounded in reality, there is little room for the feminist project to grow.

Amina Yaquin discusses Inderpal Grewal's belief that Rushdie's novel fails because it "provides a myth of liberation and struggle that would have helped present and future struggles" (62). Grewal is suggesting that the magical depiction of Sufiya makes her strength seem unrealistic. Rushdie's postmodern technique is problematic to many critics who find this project of re-envisioning counterproductive. Aijaz, who explored Rushdie's "excess of myth" also refers to Rushdie as a vagrant that is floating around in a realm of "un-belonging". He claims that this postmodern realm of "un-belonging" reinforces the power of the ruling classes because there is no recognition of identity among the subjected. Samir Dayal builds on this idea to create a complex argument that suggests the further disempowerment of women through the "blurring" of identity through fragmentation.

The problem of fragmentation for Samir Dayal is that the subversive nature of his texts isn't reflective of a productive form of ambivalence. He goes on to make the argument that while Rushdie is presenting alternate stories, he simultaneously creates female characters who reinforce the stereotypical fears of the patriarchy. He claims that by creating strong female characters and weaker male characters Rushdie is not empowering the feminine, he is reasserting the fears of the patriarchal ruling class and promoting the myths. Dayal attacks the postmodern "unbelonging" that is characteristic of Rushdie's

work, “Rushdie’s deliberate exploration of liminality blurs normal categories, dismantles conventional definitions and boundaries of nation-ness and belonging, deconstructs simple divisions of the masculine and feminine, and thematizes subjectivity as enigma (40). However, Dayal’s argument does not take into account the multiple levels of storytelling and metaphor within the text. Most importantly it does not address the creation of Sufiya Zinobia and her relationship with the narrator. Sufiya is representative of stereotypical fear of the patriarchy. This is acknowledged by the narrator himself, but that makes her ability to outlive the confining view of her nature that much more empowering.

Sufiya is a product of fantasy. From Joan Scott’s perspective, fantasy is empowerment rather than a subjection of the female or a limiting of the potential. Dayal believes that through the blurring of masculine and feminine divisions Rushdie is disempowering the female, but Scott acknowledges this disempowerment to be true only if, “historical rootedness is seen as a prerequisite for the stability of the subject of feminism, if the existence of feminism is made to depend on some inherent, timeless agency of women” (286). When one takes into account Scott’s idea of fantasy as an empowering mechanism, it is necessary to look at Rushdie’s project in a different light, with a postmodern slant—of course. Amina Yaquin suggests that Scott’s argument offers a valuable contextual read of Rushdie’s work. She claims, “It is interesting to juxtapose Scott with a feminist rereading of Rushdie’s novels which on the basis of a shared feminism, try to reclaim women’s histories from the clutches of the male narrator, particularly in *Shame* without sufficiently allowing for experiential differences to do with geographical context and class” (65). Again, it is necessary to understand the author’s struggle: “I have been a swallower of lives; and to know me, just the one of me, you’ll have to swallow the lot as well.”

The elements of misogyny that so many critics find in Rushdie’s texts are actually a postmodern representation of his own struggle with beliefs in the dominant paradigms. *Shame*’s self-reflexive narrator is emblematic of this struggle for identity. Now that we have finally made it through layer upon layer let us explore the creation of Sufiya Zinobia juxtaposed with the accepted existence of Omar Khyamm Shakil. Through these fictional characters, the narrator is acknowledging that the stories we are often told are no more salient than the ones we try to ignore. The two characters become the primary

focus of the novel—while the political upheaval of a country in turmoil encompasses them, the two remain largely unaffected. They become their own story—an unlikely pair thrown together by chance and of course—shame. They are creations of the present historical realities of the “fairy story”. And they are fictions through which the narrator can attempt to assess the only Truth possible.

Omar Khayamm Shakil is introduced at the onset of the “fairy-tale” plot of *Shame*. He is the product of shame but spends his entire life turning his back on that reality. His birth is retold in a semi-magical distortion of the true events which occurred. The story begins in the “remote border town of Q.” (1). Omar’s soon-to-be mothers are three sisters who live with their father who despises both the indigenous population of the “hellhole” town that they live in, as well as the British sahibs who have colonized it. The narrator explains, “Old Shakil loathed both worlds and had for many years remained immured in his high, fortress-like, gigantic residence which faced inward to a well-like and lightless compound yard,” (4). Mr. Shakil keeps his three daughters in isolation with him until his death, and on that day the sisters joyfully defile the memory of him by throwing a miraculous party to which they invited all of the British sahibs and a few of the most prominent members of the townspeople. It was on this night that Omar was conceived—“or so the story goes” (we are dutifully informed by the narrator). Months later all three of the sisters were miraculously pregnant. The narrator explains, “I am prepared to swear that so wholeheartedly did they wish to share the motherhood of their sibling—to transform the public shame of unwedlocked conception into the private triumph of the longed for group baby that, in short, twin phantom pregnancies, accompanied the real one; while the simultaneity of their behavior suggests the operation of some form of communal mind” (13). Immediately the narrator is suggesting the idea of myth creation that Brennan refers to. This is representative of the “myth of the nation” through the formation of the longed for “communal mind”. He is suggesting that the mothers became truly convinced of the miraculous birth of their child because of their intense desire to escape the shame that would ensue had one of them admitted to conception out of wedlock.

This view goes back to the reshaping of the story of Bilquis. In order to maintain honor, some narratives must be retold. Clearly, this birth is emblematic of the birth of Jesus to the Virgin Mary. In

order for individuals to accept Jesus as a prophet (in the Islamic tradition) or as Christ (in the Christian tradition), he could not have been born of a “harlot” so his birth was transformed by the power of myth to become a miraculous event rather than a shameful one. In every line of the text Rushdie is retelling and re-envisioning lies and truths that have come before, and he entirely blurs the distinction between the two. Through Rushdie’s relentless deconstruction of the formation of truth, some scholars, like Aijaz believe that there is no truth present in his texts. However, some things in Rushdie’s world are grounded in belief and they are embodied in the character of Sufiya Zinobia. Her name is given early in the novel—but only as a supplemental fragment of knowledge. She is still seen as a disruption of the story which is meant to be told. Sufiya is merely a part of Omar’s eventual story, but even in her developing stages the narrator cannot escape her.

Readers come to learn that Omar was “Born in a death-bed, about which there hung the ghost image of a grandfather who, dying, had consigned himself to the peripheries of hell; his first sight the spectacle of a range of topsy-turvy mountains...Omar Khayyam Shakil was afflicted, from his earliest days, by a sense of inversion, of a world turned upside down. And by something worse: the fear that he was living at the edge of the world, so close that he might fall off at any moment” (14). Omar is attributed similar characteristics as the grandfather, insofar as his inability to choose. This is why Omar is named the “peripheral hero” by the narrator. The narrator is sympathetic to Omar because, as the narrator acknowledges that, he too exists on the periphery, (as a dual emigrant) incapable of seeing the “missing bits”. An interesting relationship is established between the two characters (Omar and the narrator) because both of them are incapable of accepting the true state of their “peripheral existence”. In the story, Omar peers through his grandfather’s telescope, beyond the “border town of Q,” and sees the horizon which convinces him he must be near the “Rim of Things,” but in his nightmares there is nothing but a void beyond this Rim. There was no possibility of life beyond the acknowledgement of his shameful existence. So he decided at the age of ten to sleep as little as possible. The narrator and Omar’s situation parallels nicely. Because they are unable to accept their questionable identities they try to tell the story with which they are the most comfortable. However, as readers are being introduced to the

complex world of the young Omar, Sufiya's story begins to emerge. Sufiya is still unborn at this point in the "story" and will remain to be for ten years, but she has already begun to consume the narrator's thoughts. His mention of Sufiya is set off in parenthesis, which signifies immediately that she is disrupting the overall flow of the story, but nonetheless her presence cannot be ignored:

(His wife, the elder daughter of General Raza Hyder, was an insomniac too; but Omar Khayyam's sleeplessness is not to be compared with hers, for while his was willed, she, foolish Sufiya Zinobia, would lie in bed squeezing her eyelids shut between her thumbs and forefingers, as if she could extrude consciousness through her eyelashes, like motes of dust, or tears. And she burned, she fried, in that very room of her husbands and his grandfathers death, beside that bed of snakes and Paradise...a plague on this disobedient Time! I command this death scene back into the wings at once: shazam!)(17).

This excerpt exemplifies the disruptive nature of the text. It leaves the reader wondering if there is any potential to gain truth. The narrator is struggling to return to the story that is the one which is supposed to be told (the peripheral story that he is the most comfortable with). He commands the death scene back into the wings like magic—shazam! This implies the narrator's awareness of his unreliability and his concern with his intent and responsibility as a creator. Rushdie's narrator acknowledges his role in the creation of the text and it is this realization which makes the work so provocative and effective.

Rushdie's cynicism extends beyond the exploration of the "myth of the nation" into an even deeper exploration of the self. While Rushdie is urging his readers to question reality he must simultaneously acknowledge that he has no solid ground to stand on (because of his peripheral nature). Furthermore he must deal with the issue of the tyrant as one which exists within himself as "re-shaper" and teller of stories.

Rushdie's narrator confronts the problem of female subjection within his creation of the story. As a creator he does not know how much control he has over his own perceptions, and his own interpretation of what a story *should be*. Is he influenced by the "hallowed sacred text" of history? Rushdie's narrator provides some insight into the problem of his own storytelling:

Once upon a time there were two families, their destinies inseparable even by death. I had thought, before I began, that what I had on my hands was an almost excessively masculine tale, a saga of sexual rivalry, ambition, power, patronage, betrayal, death, revenge. 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...their stories explain, and even subsume the men's (181).

The narrator acknowledges that even he was not ready for the amount of control that the women were capable of obtaining. But nonetheless they have. In the beginning of the story Sufiya was a minor disruption who was magically removed—SHAZAM(!). She has now begun to take over the tale as it were. So, "Who is Sufiya Zinobia?"

Sufiya Zinobia's creation is no less curious than Omar Shakil's. She is a character who is shrouded in the ambiguous mystery of Rushdie's magical realist technique. It is this mystery that has caused many critics to question her role in the text. However, it is necessary to examine Sufiya's "fairy-tale" existence (her relationship to the other characters) as well as her creation (her relationship with the narrator). Sufiya is a member of the politically powerful Hyder family. She was supposed to be the reincarnation of the couple's son that was stillborn years earlier, so when they discovered her sex they were dissatisfied at the thought of this female child who should have been a male. Sufiya, "they say" was blushing the day she was born, as if she knew the inevitability of the shame which surrounded her very being. It is necessary to compare this acceptance of shame to Omar who chooses to ignore his own shameful manifestation and exist "on the periphery," always knowing that he is capable of crossing over to the Rim of Things but never taking the chance. Sufiya does not have the luxury of choice. Her shame is revealed clearly, for all to see. But Sufiya's shame does not end with her sex; it begins with it. Sufiya magically becomes the fury of all of the shame surrounding her. It is not her own being that is shameful but the creation of the myth of shame which those around her participate in. When the two-month old Sufiya contracts a fever, her mother immediately assumes (or creates?) the worst scenario for the outcome of her child, the narrator explains:

Bilquis, rendering hair and sari with equal passion, was heard to utter a mysterious sentence: 'It's a judgment,' she cried beside her daughter's bed. Despairing of military and civilian doctors she turned to a local Hakim who prepared an expensive liquid distilled from cactus roots, ivory dust and parrot feathers, which saved the girl's life but which (as the medicine man had warned) had the effect of slowing her down for the rest of her years, because the unfortunate side-effect of a potion so filled with elements of longevity was to retard the progress of time inside the body of anyone to whom it was given (100).

So this is what becomes of Sufiya Zinobia. Because she was named a source of shame, the myth continues and it grows within her. It becomes her. She embodies the nature—the very essence of shame, and her path of destruction is dangerously close. Sufiya begins to commit heinous crimes but remains unaware of her involvement in them. At the age of five she is found in the middle of the night at her neighbor's chicken coup where she has twisted the necks of dozens of chicken. And later, after her marriage to her "would-be" savior, Omar Shakil, she kills four boys in the same manner as the chickens after having intercourse with each of them.

This vicious portrayal of Sufiya is what Dayal was referring to when he discusses gender issues in *Shame* and the problem of blurring the lines of the feminine and the masculine. The author says that, "Men and women in the Third world invariably seem condemned to a stereotypically feudal, patriarchal, or neocolonialist social structure in which women are subordinated" (48). Dayal claims that Rushdie is validating these stereotypes through his feminization of male characters, "Male characters in *Shame* are passivized and feminized, sometimes to the point of inducing a mesmerized or melancholic masochism: the desire for the male self as others appears as masochism. The wish to be destroyed as desired object may well function as a subtext in a narrative of the destruction of men by women in a text written by a man" (50). The author is concerned with the exploitation of the common patriarchal fears. Dayal believes that Rushdie is reinforcing the male anxiety of a sexually dominant female. So, in this respect Rushdie destroys the possibility of the female agency to have power beyond the fears (and stereotypes) of the patriarchy. This is the problem that leads Dayal to ask, "Which borders is Rushdie transgressing,

exactly, and which borders is he keeping in place?" Aijaz expresses a similar view concerning the nature of Sufiya, he says, "She becomes in this passage then, the oldest of the misogynist myths: the virgin who is really a vampire, the irresistible temptress who seduces men in order to kill them, not an object of male manipulation but a devourer of hapless men" (1468). According to these scholars the characterizations support the dominant beliefs of the controlling forces rather than dispel them. But Sufiya is representative of something beyond myth or stereotype. However, it becomes clear that Sufiya is a manifestation of reality whereas Omar is a peripheral distortion of reality.

Although the narrator has previously suggested that Omar is the "peripheral hero" of the story he later returns to acknowledge that, "This is a novel about Sufiya Zinobia...or perhaps it would be more accurate, if also more opaque, to say that Sufiya Zinobia is about this novel" (108). Omar is given the role of the peripheral hero because the novel cannot be about Sufiya Zinobia—or at least the "story" cannot be about Sufiya Zinobia. She is a woman, she is shame. Stories must not be told about shame. The contrary and dependent states of opacity and accuracy are an incredibly important theme within the novel. History which informs our notions of truth is also incapable of allowing the true story to emerge. Sufiya embodies shame because she absorbs the shame which has been imposed upon her. So, "Who is Sufiya Zinobia?" Is she the "hapless devourer of men," is she the weak feeble minded girl magically transformed into the fury of shame? She is both of these things in a sense but for the narrator, the creator of the tale, she has a much larger role. She is "about this novel" in her own opaque way.

Sufiya Zinobia is "the ghost of a story that might have been" she is the "corpse of a murdered girl". Sufiya Zinobia is the creation of a false imposition of history on to the present day reality. The narrator explains that while living in London a tragedy occurred involving a young Pakistani girl and her father. The girl had a relationship with a white boy and when the father found out he murdered her. The narrator discusses his reaction to the crime:

The story appalled me when I heard it, appalled me in a fairly obvious way...but even more appalling was my realization that, like the interviewed friends etc., I, too, found myself understanding the root of the killer... We who have grown up on a diet of honor and shame can

still grasp what must seem unthinkable to peoples living in the aftermath of the death of God and of tragedy... (118)

Sufiya Zinobia is the product of creation, but she is a creation of reality. The narrator explains his interpretation of the crime and how it would be viewed from Western eyes, how they would see the “Asian face under the eyes of the foe” and he explains that she then becomes Sufiya Zinobia. And consequently becomes “about this novel”. The narrator acknowledges the birth of this character, as one who manifests from reality. He even names the girl “Anahita Muhammad, known as Anna”. The narrator discusses further his creation of Sufiya (or his inability to ignore her?):

She danced behind my eyes, her nature changing each time I glimpsed her: now innocent, now whore, then a third and a fourth thing. But finally she eluded me, she became a ghost, and I realized that in order to write about her, about shame, I would have to go back East, to let the idea breathe its favorite air. Anna, deported, repatriated to a country she had never seen, caught brain-fever and turned into a sort of idiot (119).

With the creation of Sufiya in mind, it is necessary to reevaluate the claims of Dayal and Aijaz. The narrator has even questioned his own authority; he has explained that he has left his country of birth and is now a dual emigrant who has “learned Pakistan in slices.” He says, “I think what I am confessing is that, however I choose to write about over-there, I am forced to reflect that world in fragments of broken mirrors...I must reconcile myself to the inevitability of the missing bits” (66). But the fragmented self is not merely a vagrant, or a postmodern obsession with “un belonging”, it is a longing to re-envision his own interpretations of truth, masculine, though they may be. He understands that he exists on the periphery and that Sufiya has much more “Truth” in her narrative than Omar or even himself. He acknowledges her status to him as “innocent, guilty, whore” because these are each different manifestations of her. Constantly in flux along with history—every moment—new identities—new perceptions.

The narrator is questioning the story of Sufiya Zinobia and the presence of shame within her. Sufiya, the “hapless devourer of men” has become something entirely different. She has become ‘anti-

myth' and 'anti-fairy-story' because she is forced to be each of these things. Her role is completely contradictory. She is the symbol for shame but simultaneously she is the symbol for a reality which exists outside of the historical imposition of shame onto a culture, and specifically onto women. In the following passage the narrator explores the roots of shame—which have no objective nature; therefore, shame itself is fictitious. Shame is a product of historical myth:

Let me voice my suspicion: the brain-fever that made Sufiya Zinobia preternaturally receptive to all sorts of things that float around in the ether enabled her to absorb, like a sponge, a host of unfelt feelings. Where do you imagine they go?—I mean emotions that should have been felt, but were not—such as regret for a harsh word, guilt for a crime, embarrassment, propriety, shame?—Imagine shame as a liquid, let's say a sweet fizzy tooth-rotting drink, stored in a vending machine. Push the right button and a cup plops down under a pissing stream of fluid. How to push the button? Nothing to it. Tell a lie, sleep with a white boy, get born the wrong sex...The button pusher does not drink what was ordered; and the fluid of shame spills, spreading in a frothy lake across the floor(125).

The shame which has imposed itself upon Sufiya finally results in the murder of Omar. It happened so easily, just with the push of a button. Make a selection—choose a history—but then it chooses you. Sufiya is a product of her historical roots and the narrator's inability to escape his connection to her and to history. The Author, the Narrator and Sufiya, "do not refer purely, and simply, to an actual individual insofar as (they) simultaneously give rise to a variety of egos and a series of subjective positions that individuals of any class may come to occupy" (24). Rushdie's fragmented story allows room for multiple histories to exist in one space, and suggests that the myths of a culture can become "a phantom with one arm lifted in a gesture of farewell".

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