Salman Rushdie's *Shalimar The Clown*: Tragic Tale of a Smashed World

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Salman Rushdie is, perhaps, the most controversial and political novelist of our troubled times. The world of his fictions and non-fictions accurately portrays the complex and confusing state of postcolonial world. Almost all of his major writings bear the testimony of his understanding and interpretation of history and the world, and their lasting influence on the life of common humanity. *Shalimar The Clown (2005) is his* most engaging book since *Midnight's Children*(1981). For so long a devout celebrant of postcolonial hybridity and diversity, of cultural fusion and merging, Rushdie is here grappling imaginatively with the shock of 11 September 2001 and the wars that have followed. He renders this very complex phenomenon in the following words:

> Everywhere was now a part of everywhere else. Russia, America, London, Kashmir. Our lives, our stories, flowed into one another's, were no longer our own, individual, discrete. This unsettled people. There were collisions and explosions. The world was no longer calm. (Rushdie 2005:37)

This fine novel reminds us that, unfortunately, we forget this at our peril.

In this novel Rushdie has brilliantly portrayed the recent tragic history of Kashmir, the homeland of Rushdie's maternal grandfather and one-time favourite location for Rushdie family holidays, had appeared only as a shadowy original for the Valley of K in the children's fantasy *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* (1990), and as the point of departure for Aadam Aziz, cast out of paradise after losing his faith in *Midnight's Children*. It has been done with great poignancy and sensitivity throughout the novel. While depicting the story of his characters, he also weaves the

story of Kashmir, its life and culture, and the degeneration of this Paradise into Hell. Making the 'personal bleed into the political', Rushdie has once again confirmed his concern for the modern world at large and Kashmir in particular, lamenting the loss of love, innocence and brotherhood, and thus signalling the dawn of a *new world* in disarray.

When we look at the fictional corpus of Rushdie we find that *Midnight's Children* is the only novel, pre-*Shalimar*, to have given Kashmiri politics a more than passing glance. In that earlier work, the weight of Kashmir's woes and pangs are piled on to the ancient shoulders of the unwashing, cussword-loving Tai the Boatman, who sincerely believes himself to be more of a Kashmiri than an Indian, and who ardently believes in his personal political mantra "Kashmir for the Kashmiris" (Rushdie 1993: 1). With heavy symbolic significance, Tai dies in the year of Partition i.e. 1947 when, "infuriated by India and Pakistan's struggle over his valley", he walks to Chhamb and stands in between to become an easy prey for opposing forces. "Naturally", readers are told, "they shot him" (37).

Shalimar the Clown is, in certain ways, the extension of Tai's story with conspicuous deep insights. Here too we see the annihilation of the idea of Kashmir (Heaven on Earth) as it is caught among violent and opposing political interests. Here too, it is the ordinary village Kashmiris who suffer and die as a result of antagonisms that are fostered and manipulated by distant national leaders in pursuit of equally distant national ideals. Apart from these striking similarities there are some differences too, however. Whilst Tai the boatman dies at the point of Partition in 1947, the two Kashmiri protagonists of *Shalimar*, Shalimar Noman himself and Boonyi Kaul, are born at the moment of Partition, and so come to act as mirrors of a post-Independence Kashmir in much the same way that Saleem, in the earlier novel, was a mirror for post-Independence India. Whilst in *Midnight's Children* Kashmir is simply a micro presented as the thorn in the side of Indian and Pakistani post-Independence optimism, in *Shalimar it becomes a* macroas it has a much grander and more global role to play. Here Kashmir has been commemorated as a symbol to point out the inner fissures of the US (Capitalism) led efforts to

establish a global consensus on political and economical affairs in the wake of the Second World War. In the second place (and inter-connectedly) it is used to announce the decisive abortion of the idea, promoted by American neo-conservative intellectuals led by Francis Fukuyama after the conclusion of the Cold War, and the fall of Berlin Wall in 1989, that history was coming to an end because western capitalist 'liberal' democracy was triumphing in all the possible ways. But every death presupposes a new birth. One form of history may have ended with the collapse of state Communism, but the novel reminds us that US intrigues against Russia during the Cold War had also brought new forms of history into being that were now bearing fruit in regions such as Afghanistan and Kashmir.

Shalimar The Clown, in this sense, addresses other elements into the baggage of South Asian politics: the globalisation of the power of the United States after the conclusion of the Cold War, and the emergence of new ideologies of violence such as those given their most grotesque embodiment in the attacks on New York in September 11, 2001, 26/11 in India, and so many others including London and Mumbai. This very dire scenario yields to most striking difference between *Midnight's Children* and *Shalimar The Clown*: in the former one Kashmiriness (love, peace, and brotherhood) is being smashed by opposing forces of India and Pakistan only, but in the latter one this very exclusive identity has been shown to us crushed by insensitive forces of Indian army, the Islamic insurgents from Pakistan, and US interests. As a result Kashmir becomes the living inferno of collision and explosion that unsettles its social and cultural fabric, its identity as well as the identity of its people. History and individual both are corrupted. Not only the eponymous hero of the novel but other characters too highlight this very aspect of rottenness, for Rushdie believes that history and individual, "… interpenetrate and that is how the writer needs to examine them, the one in the context of the other" (Rushdie 1984: 57).

The novel is a beautiful story of Pachigam, a small village in Kashmir situated in the serene surroundings besides the river Muskadoon, a quiet and peaceful village. The people of

this village hourly communicate with the richness of Mother Nature and thus lead a life of happiness and contentment. But this blissful oblivion is not immune to the harsh realities of life when insurgency first reared its ugly head in the form of Kabalis from Pakistan. The seed of distrust and hatred sown by the fundamentalists and extremists, the by-products of a savage and cruel dissection of the nation, gradually take enormous forms and engulfs the whole valley in its fire. Partition of the nation did not only carve out two nations out of one but it also created a sharp division between two communities i.e. Hind and Muslim. The partition between these two nations was not solely based on geographical accounts but it also accounts for some deep psychological trauma| which still reverberates in the minds and hearts of two nations, two communities and people. Through this novel as Cowley puts it, Rushdie expresses "…sadness for the ideal that has been lost in Kashmir and in so many parts of the Muslim world, the ideal of tolerance and secular pluralism" (Cowley 2005:27). This novel is the moving story of Noman, who called himself Shalimar the clown partly in the honour of his lady love, son of the village headman.He is a sweet innocent boy, "clown prince of the performing troupe" (50); a young boy madly in love with PanditPyarelalKaul's daughter, Bhoomi or Boonyi as she prefers to be called. Shalimar and Boonyi's love blooms in the beautiful and pristine environs of the Kashmir valley hidden from the eyes of their elders. When people find out, they uphold the values of 'Kahmiriyat' and bless the young couple. As the father of Shalimar says:

> We are all brothers and sisters here. There is no Hindu-Muslim issue. Two Kashmiri – two Pachigami – youngsters wish to marry, that's all. A love match is acceptable to both families and so a marriage there will be; both Hindu and Muslim customs will be observed. (110)

But Boonyi is far from happy. Claustrophobia grips her, and she realizes rather too late that she wants to escape. "She knew then that she would do anything to get out of Pachigam… she would move faster than fortune." She wishes, "…get me away from here, away from my father, away from the slow death and slower life, away from Shalimar the clown" (114). The

free unbridled spirit inherited from her mother coupled with her youthfulness ill-marks the love story of Shalimar and Boonyi, giving it a tragic turn. Increasing influence of alien presence on the Kashmiri landscape slowly starts corroding and degrading the values of the valley, the 'Kashmiriyat'. This influence can be seen in the radical preaching's of Bulbul Fakh, the 'iron mullah'; and in the arrival of Maximilian Ophuls on the scene, the representative of American interest.He is European-born, Jewish-American Ambassador to Kashmir who in his younger days fought in the resistance against the Nazis, but who latterly has become a secret negotiator for American interests around the globe. His involvement in Kashmir is registered through his impact upon the lives of Boonyi, whom he seduces, impregnates and abandons, and the eponymous Shalimar, her husband, who, embittered by the loss of his wife, becomes involved in guerrilla conflict. Having trained in Afghanistan using weapons that Ophuls has himself provided when the US was covertly arming Islamic terrorists after the Russian invasion in 1979, Shalimar becomes an assassin in Europe and the US, and finally murders Ophuls on the doorstep of his daughter's apartment block.

Ophuls' seduction of Boonyi, and their subsequent relationship – during which he gluts her with goods and comestibles before abandoning her out of hand when he loses interest in her - can clearly be read as an allegory of America's relationship with what Rushdie calls in *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* (1999) "the back yards of the world".(2) America's power seduces, its affections imprison, its commodities corrupt, and it abandons once it has taken what it wants. Boonyi is thus a product of America's love for the world, and when she speaks, she speaks in the voice of Kashmir. She tells Ophuls:

> I am your handiwork made flesh. You took beauty and created hideousness, and out of this monstrosity your child will be born. Look at me. I am the meaning of your deeds. I am the meaning of your so-called love, your destructive, selfish, wanton love. Look at me. Your love looks just like hatred. … I was honest and you turned me into your lie. This is not me. This is not me. This is you. (205)

Her desire to excel herself was but a fantasy lived in the shadow of the glamour and glitter of elite society. Boonyi was but a simple, naive village girl with big dreams in her eyes that were terribly misdirected. The path she chose for herself, sooner or later had to lead only to one destination, and that was imminent disaster for its traveler. Like Ila of The Shadow Lines, a novel by AmitavGhosh, Boonyi desires freedom from a middle class orthodoxy, but she discovers that the free world she had tried to build for herself was not free from the squalor of betrayal. Her disastrous flirtation with desire led to an avalanche of catastrophe not only in her life but also in the lives of the people related to her. She loses her Kashmiriyat and tumbles down the path of complete psychotic degeneration, waiting alone in the wilderness for death to truly free her. Freedom was what Boonyi desired, "But free isn't free of charge." (253). The freedom that she chooses for herself is 'false freedom', an illusion, a bait to tempt her to sin, which she, "… like Eve, is easily tempted and eagerly accepts the Ambassador's offer of a change …" (Mathur 2007:92) In the character of Boonyi we find the eagerness for liberation, lured by which she symbolizing Kashmir, loses herself courting destruction.

Here Rushdie makes a very pertinent point: that Kashmir's problems stem not from inherent Hinud-Muslim antipathy, but from a Hindu-Muslim antipathy that has been brought into being by political processes and historical forces. Though this point is well made, however, the implication that Kashmir, before the 1940s, was a paradaisical zone of tolerance and harmony, in which the only conflicts result from squabbles over cooking pots, seems a stretched idea. This idea of Kashmir is nothing but the continuation of same idea of idealised, muti-cultural utopias in Rushdie's fictions that are under threat from the forces of singularity and oppression: Gup in *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, Moorish Spain in *The Moor's Last Sigh* (1995). In this respect, the Kashmir of *Shalimar* plays a familiar iconic role in Rushdie's imaginative universe. The problems in Kashmir, however, seem too present, too rooted in a long history of antipathies, for readers to suspend disbelief sufficiently in the interests of the broader symbolic scheme.

Perhaps the most striking feature of the novel is the effectiveness with which Rushdie conveys his sense of outrage at the systematic slaughter carried out in Pachigam by both Islamic insurgents and the Indian army. This outrage reaches a climax twice in the novel, and on both occasions the narrator is left unable to do anything more that ask questions. On the first occasion – after "a week-long orgy of unprovoked violence" against Kashmiri Hindus during which the Indian army stood by because it helped 'simplify' the situation - the question is 'why'. As Rushdie puts it in strong words:

> There were six hundred thousand Indian troops in Kashmir but the pogrom of the pandits was not prevented, why was that? Three and a half lakhs of human beings arrived in Jammu as displaced persons and for many months the government did not provide shelters or relief or even register their names, why was that? When the government finally built camps it only allowed for six thousand families to remain in the state, dispersing others around the country where they would be invisible and impotent, why was that? … There was one bathroom per three hundred persons in many camps why was that … and the pandits of Kashmir were left to rot in their slum camps, to rot while the army and the insurgency fought over the bloodied and broken valley, to dream of return, to die while dreaming of return, to die after the dream of return died so that they could not even die dreaming of it, why was that why was that why was that why was that why was that. (296-97)

On the second occasion – after the Indian army takes revenge on the village of Pachigam for managing to hold out against them for so long – the question is 'who'.

> Who lit that fire? Who burned that orchard? Who shot those brothers who laughed their whole lives long? Who killed the sarpanch? Who broke his hands? Who broke his arms? Who broke his ancient neck? Who shackled those men?

> Who made those men disappear? Who shot those boys? Who shot those girls? Who smashed that house? Who smashed *that* house? Who smashed *that* house? … Who killed the children? Who whipped the parents? Who raped that lazy-eyed woman? Who raped that grey-haired lazy-eyed woman as she screamed about snake vengeance? Who raped that woman again? Who raped that woman again? Who raped that woman again? Who raped that woman again? Who raped that dead woman? Who raped that dead woman again? (308)

Due to all these heinous atrocities Pachigam ceases to exist. Charged with harboring extremists, the village bears the full brunt of the atrocities of the armed forces. Everyone is killed, people and life is totally obliterated from the place where love had once bloomed and blossomed. "The village of Pachigam still existed on maps of Kashmir, but that day it ceased to exist anywhere else, except in memory" (309). The furies thus, find a new home in the action of the armed forces meant for protection of people. Rushdie here indicates the pathetic situation of the people of Kashmir who have to bear the atrocities of both the terrorists as well as the forces primarily meant for their protection. Life for them has left no option open for them to live in freedom and without fear: "… undone by the twin forces of nationalism and religious fundamentalism. As usual in Rushdie's novels, these forces are not the enemies of enlightenment as much as they are the enemies of freedom, and that means they are the enemies of the natural. (Roth 2005: 19). It is not only fundamentalism or extremism, which proves to be detrimental for life and country; nationalism can also endanger life and freedom when taken in the stringent sense concerning itself only with selfish aim of possession and power. Bound in these twin chains, an individual lose all, identity, liberty and life. The fury unleashed by their combined powers creates only havoc and destruction wherever they exist.

These questions are strong enough to shake anybody who is sensitive to these issues. These questions are not asked in vain; it is not merely formality. They have two constructive political functions to perform. Firstly the very act of posing the question of bearing witness to

atrocity constitutes a potent political gesture: a demand for attention and a demand for redress. Secondly Rushdie's question-asking attitude also functions as a plea to moderate Muslims to seek to reform their religion, and a plea to European and North American politicians to create a global political context that helps rather than hinders their progress. In this way Rushdie's novel asserts the need to recognise the honourable, even utopian, intentions behind the post-war allied efforts to bring about a global consensus regarding the welfare of common humanity all around the world. At the same time it also asserts the need to recognise that those initially honourable intentions have gone sour, or at least been kidnapped and corrupted by forces more pragmatic and cynical.

If there is one redeeming element in *Shalimar*, it resides in the next generation, as was the case in *Midnight's Children*. Kashmir itself may have been annihilated, but the seduction of Kashmir by America (the seduction of Boonyi by Maximilian Ophuls) has produced a bastard child – India Ophuls a.k.a. Kashmira Noman - a hybrid being, who lives in America and who loves her American father, but who is also in the process of discovering who her father really is, what he has done, and who her mother was. Global politics may be such that old Kashmir no longer exists, but Kashmira's story tells us something different. She embodies the emergence of a new beginning from the chaos and turmoil of atrocities to the arrival of a bright new dawn, full of hope and regeneration. Her presence is an indication by the author that Kashmir will not be lost; it will emerge from the darkness into the light of true freedom and hope for its entire people, a new life. She symbolizes this new beginning in her realization and acceptance of her true identity, in her love for Yuvraj, and ultimately in her emerging victorious by executing the hatred and violence of Shalimar. She was no longer a prisoner of fury when she lets her arrow find its mark. In the end, as novelist says, “She was not fire but ice”(398).

In the epigraph of the novel Rushdie quotes a line from Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*: ‘A plague on both your houses.’ As might be expected from such an epigraph, the novel is one of fury. Whatever be the interpretations of *Shalimar The Clown*, this is much is certain that this

is another classic example of fury, the vintage Rushdie kind, not the phony outrage at the shallowness of the Western world that sank *Fury*, but a wrath aimed in the opposite direction, at the medieval barbarism that lingers in our so called modern and civilized world. Undoubtedly this novel does not have the caliber of *Midnight's Children*, but it does mark Rushdie's deep re-engagement with the themes of political injustice and religious bigotry; themes that have made him one of our most important living novelists.

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