

## Salman Rushdie: Reading the Postcolonial Texts in the Era of Empire

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In the post-9/11 era many assertions of cultural difference are now being appropriated in the name of the neoliberal empire and a perpetual War on Terror. Most works of recent postcolonial scholarship, as Gayatri Spivak aptly points out, have been reframed in the service of “easy postnationalism that is supposed to have come into being with globalization” (1). There is, therefore, a danger that in this process of theoretical overgeneralization, the particularities of postcolonial nation-states are overwritten by the universalizing and inescapable dictates of the current regime of high capital and its attendant cultural imperialism. Based on these assumptions about the current phase of high capital, Spivak suggests that the main role of the humanities is “the empowerment of an informed imagination” (2). This training of an informed imagination, Spivak further asserts, must continue “persistently” and “forever” (3). Focusing on writing by Salman Rushdie, this article attempts to articulate a nuanced model of reading the postcolonial texts in this new era of empire.

I appropriate the term “inundation” from Pakistani military strategy.<sup>1</sup> In its military usage, inundation involves the pre-planned flooding of a certain area, as a last-resort defensive measure, to impede the progress of advancing armor. In case of Pakistan, the canals and dams in the Punjab region are constructed with this strategic aim. The purpose of this strategy is to ensure that the most potent ground war machine—the tank—cannot move into Pakistani territory. Within the context of this essay, inundation suggests a technique of reading texts to allow the critic to add silenced knowledge—historical and theoretical—hence complicating any reductive readings of the texts. This exercise, then, transforms the text from a site of arrival to a point of departure. An inundated text would therefore take us beyond the burden of representation while also ensuring that it can no longer be read to enforce or advance one particular agenda, especially any attempts at making the text speak for empire. Inundation cannot be viewed as an overarching method, but rather as a bricoleur technique that draws

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<sup>1</sup> My knowledge of the term is based on ten years of service in the Pakistani army as an Infantry officer. The definition provided is from memory as no military texts, being classified, are available for citation. I have also briefly theorized this concept in another essay published in the *South Asian Review*.

from other postcolonial theories. However, inundated readings can perhaps enhance our pedagogical effectiveness and assist in the unrelenting task of training the imagination of our students about the subalterns from the global periphery. I will, therefore, both explain the concept<sup>2</sup> and provide my own attempted inundation of metropolitan readings of Salman Rushdie.<sup>3</sup> My aim, however, is not to deride the critical works of these scholars, but rather to use their scholarship as a basis to enhance our level of engagement with the postcolonial texts. My attempt, therefore, is grounded in gratitude for the efforts of my peers and predecessors in the field.

In order to inundate the texts, we must keep two aspects of their production and reception in our minds: the location and historical context of the author and the politics of the critic. Just as the author produces a work within a certain regime of power and politics drawing from what Fredric Jameson considers the “raw materials” of a literary text, so does the critic. The critics, as Edward Said points out, “create not only the values by which art is judged and understood, but they embody in writing those processes and actual conditions in the *present* by means of which art and writing bear significance” (*The Text* 53). Consequently, critics have an enormous responsibility in normalizing the representations of the periphery offered by postcolonial authors. The critics of postcolonial works attempt interpretation of these works for metropolitan audiences, and these interpretations are of course refracted through their own worldliness. We must, therefore, deal not only with the text and the author, but also with the critic.

In the current political milieu, writers like Rushdie, who by choosing postcolonial sites—both in terms of temporal history and spatial

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<sup>2</sup> The need to define such a concept arose from my experience of teaching a course on postcolonial literature for a sophomore class at Florida State University. In an attempt to insert a novel in my class schedule, I gave the students the option to choose one out of seven listed novels to read in their own time. The selected novel was supposed to be part of a take-home exam at the end of the semester. While grading their exams, I learned, to my horror, that these fictions had now become my students’ truth: Hence wife beating, polygamy, murder, and terrorism became the main tropes for them to define the postcolonial world, and since they read it in their own time, the text alone was not sufficient in educating them about the cultures of the periphery, it rather became a site that cemented their previously held stereotypes. Using critical works on the novel did not seem to help much either. Hence, I decided to come up with a concept that not only attempts to deconstruct the text, but also allows us to insert theoretical and historical knowledge to complicate its reading by the students and critics alike.

<sup>3</sup> Certainly deconstruction, invagination, and supplementarity are all important strategies. Spivak’s invagination and catachresis are also two good examples of deconstructive strategies. All of these strategies are meant to make the text unresolved, and hence harder to reduce under a particular regime of signs or stereotypes. Inundation is not a departure from these strategies, but rather a fusion that insists on problematizing not only the text but also its critical reception by metropolitan critics. In the metropolitan negotiation of the peripheral texts, the question of interpretation is of great significance, especially in a post-9/11 world in which old stereotypes and metonymic readings of the cultures of the periphery have become more acceptable.

location—as the topoi of their fiction, intentionally or inadvertently become the informed intellectuals who represent the natives to the metropolitan audience. Rushdie, therefore, because of his lived experience, his multicultural background and the plethora of assumptions associated with it, automatically assumes the role of the so called cultural informant who represents East to West. Similarly, the critic, located in the metropolitan, also reads the diasporic writers works with a certain horizon of expectations, with a certain set idea of what to expect and what to extrapolate. It is this author-critic nexus—representation and interpretation—that deserves our attention. I will, in this brief study, focus on the critical reception of three major novels of Salman Rushdie,<sup>4</sup> albeit symptomatically, to inundate the problems of representation and critical interpretation for postcolonial works within metropolitan cultures.

Rushdie, to borrow Timothy Brennan's expressive term, can first be placed as a cosmopolitan, which Brennan<sup>5</sup> defines as follows:

In the interplay of class and race, metropolis and periphery, 'high' and 'low' . . . cosmopolitans have found a special home, because they are both capturing a new world reality that has a definite social basis in immigration and international communications, and are at the same time fulfilling the paradoxical expectations of a metropolitan public. . . . But more importantly, they are writers for whom the national affiliations that had been previously 'given' as part of the common worldview of the Third World Literature have lost their meanings. (38-39)

Rushdie seems to display all the important attributes encapsulated by Brennan: a definite social basis in immigration and international communications and the expectations of a metropolitan public. Rushdie's class background also has a direct impact on the way he represents the postcolonial. Rushdie comes from an affluent upper-middle-class Muslim Indian family and has lived in England and the USA most of his adult life. Furthermore, England and the West are the material arenas in which he writes his works, and these works target primarily metropolitan audiences. For Rushdie, therefore, these circumstantial, economical, and social determinants are inescapable. What becomes important to remember is that Rushdie is a cosmopolitan intellectual who represents the East to a predominantly Western audience from a safe perch in the West, and we should therefore not make the mistake of reading his works as those of a cultural informant.

There are also certain common attributes that appeal to the critics in creating a postcolonial canon of counter-canonical works, as explained by Aijaz Ahmad:

The essential task of a 'Third world' novel it is said, is to give appropriate form (preferably allegory, but epic also, or fairy tale, or whatever). The range of questions

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<sup>4</sup> I am intentionally not including *The Satanic Verses* in this discussion, for that would require a separate study of its own.

<sup>5</sup> While Timothy Brennan's definition of the cosmopolitan intellectuals is exceptionally well conceived, his scholarship on Rushdie needs a more rigorous questioning.

that may be asked of the texts which are currently in the process of being canonized within this categorical counter-canon must predominantly refer, then, in one way or the other to representation of colonialism, nationhood, postcoloniality, the typology of rulers, their powers, corruptions, and so forth. What is disconcerting, nevertheless, is that a whole range of texts which do not ask those particular questions in any foregrounded manner would then have to be excluded from or pushed to the margins of this emerging counter-canon. (124)

Both critics' views facilitate the inundation of Rushdie's works and their critical reception. Rushdie, like other diasporic writers, is based in the West but offers fictions of the postcolonial periphery to the metropolitan audiences. It is also clear that Rushdie, being partially determined by his circumstances, writes with a view to the demands and expectations of the market.<sup>6</sup> This adaptation to the market demands is clear in Rushdie's shift from the style of his first novel (*Grimus*), which was a financial failure to his second novel (*Midnight's Children*), which became a literary and commercial success.

Why did Rushdie's first novel fail to garner any worthwhile critical attention? In Rushdie's own words in the novel, it is because he is still "looking for a suitable voice to speak in" (*Grimus* 32). But what is this suitable voice? I believe it to be a voice more amenable to metropolitan tastes, a voice that would fit the horizon of expectations constructed around diasporic fictions, a certain ideal type created by the metropolitan critics. And not surprisingly, this lack of a suitable voice in *Grimus* is touched upon by almost all of the Rushdie critics.

Catherine Cundy considers *Grimus* a "product of a period when Rushdie had not yet achieved the synthesis of diverse cultural strands and narrative forms" (24). Timothy Brennan, on the other hand, thinks that *Grimus* "fails even though it is carried off with professional brilliance simply because it lacks a *habitus*" (70). For James Harrison, Rushdie in *Grimus* "has not yet found either the theme or the style that will allow him to be the writer that he would in time become" (33). D.C.R.A. Goonetilleke also considers *Grimus* a failure. In his view, *Grimus* "satirizes ideas and social systems—but in abstract. The next stage is to locate this in the real world" (15). All these critics consider *Grimus* a failure, not because it is not well written, or because it does not tell a good story, but simply because it is too abstract. Readers are seeking the attributes found in other diasporic novels.

In *Grimus* Rushdie practices his ability to merge genres, and his blending of Eastern and Western philosophies, myths, and narrative techniques. The title of the book itself, which Rushdie explains is an anagram for the Persian word Simurg, leads many critics to interesting explanations. Rushdie's own explanation of the concept of Simurg both within and without the novel is as follows:

There is a Sufi poem in which thirty birds set out to find the Simurg on the mountain where he lives. When they reach the peak, they find that they themselves are, or rather

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<sup>6</sup> A brief look at how the manuscript for *The Satanic Verses* was auctioned would be enough to convince one of Rushdie's mercenary approach to market demands.

have become, the Simurg. The name, you see, means thirty birds, Si, thirty. Murg, birds. (209)

This is an outrageously reductive explanation of the most complex work of Sufi mysticism in Persian thought. Talking about *Grimus* outside the work in an interview to John Haffenden, Rushdie says:

It was easy in the sense that it [*Grimus*] was the only book which had its source in another book, a twelfth century Sufi narrative poem called *The Conference of the Birds*, which is the closest thing in Persian literature to *Pilgrim's Progress*. The characters are all birds, which is why the central character of *Grimus* is a bird, Flapping Eagle. (43)

As is revealed later in the interview, although Rushdie seems to have a good grasp of the content of the poem, it is clear he does not really know what Attar's poem is all about. This is where an informed inundation of the text and its critical reception can be useful, especially while using the novel in a metropolitan classroom. First, the title referred to by Rushdie is Orientalist, and does not correspond to the Persian title of the poem, *Muntaq-attair*, meaning *The Logic of the Birds*. Secondly, what seems a wild-goose chase to Rushdie is the most profound book on Sufism in Persian thought. The poem, at least the modern Persian edition of it, comprises 333 pages and explains all the stages of a Sufi's quest for ultimate truth, including also numerous *Hakayat*, or fables, related to various moral and philosophical questions.

Thus in *Grimus*, Rushdie tries, in his words, "to take a theme out of eastern philosophy and mythology and transpose it into a western convention" (Haffenden 43). However, the only aspect of the poem that is clearly foregrounded is the pun on the term Si-Murg itself—none of its philosophical depth finds a true reference. Not a single critic questions Rushdie's familiarity with the Persian work itself—it is simply assumed that Rushdie knows the poem. And even though there is no worthwhile East-West fusion in the novel, a mere reference to an Eastern work suffices to suggest that such a fusion exists.

Hence, to James Harrison, one of the intertexts of *Grimus* is "the Persian poem in which thirty birds climb a mountain in search of a god called 'Simurg' only to have it dawn upon them, on finding no one there, that Simurg consists of "Si and "Murg" and means "thirty Birds"(38). Interestingly, Rushdie himself has become the source for the critic—the critic is quoting from the Rushdie interview I quoted above—and reducing once again a great work of Islamic philosophy to a mere adventure of birds looking for a "god," named Simurg. An inundated reading of *Grimus* and its critical reception would use the text and its reception as a launching pad to study its intertexts deeply. One could use Rushdie's use of the Simurgh and *Muntaq-attair* in teaching not just the history of Persian poetry but also the importance of mystic poetic tradition in Persia as well as the Muslim world. But this would occur only if the reductive

readings of the texts themselves<sup>7</sup> are inundated with the knowledge of the novel's raw materials.

The same critical approach, albeit with some modifications, can be traced in the scholarship about *Midnight's Children*, Rushdie's second and most successful novel. It seems that for the critics what Rushdie starts in *Grimus*—the fusion of East and West—finally matures into a respectable technique. One reason why most critics find *Midnight's Children* a great work of art is simply because of its varying intertexts and because it has exactly the type of subjects and themes that a postcolonial work is supposed to have: allegory, corrupt rulers, abuses of power, magic, and myth. Since the novel has a *habitus* in India, borrowing Brennan's term from above, it makes it all the more palatable to the reader.

Catherine Cundy considers *Midnight's Children* an improvement over *Grimus* because in *Midnight's Children*, Rushdie finally “achieves a successful fusion of East and West in terms of both form and content” (26). This statement seems to reassert the assumption about the postcolonial novel which has now become the norm in the counter-canon—cultural fusion in order to reach a wider audience.

Nancy E. Batty goes one step further in suggesting a stylistic fusion. In her view Rushdie's narrative technique in *Midnight's Children* draws heavily on *The Arabian Nights*, especially the narrator, Scheherazade, who in Batty's words, “provides Rushdie with both the precept and organizing principle of his narrative . . . the creation of suspense” (70). In tracing the ancient Eastern intertexts—which Rushdie clearly refers to in the novel—the critic takes it for granted that such a reference is embedded in the narrative, thus construing that Saleem Sinai of *Midnight's Children* uses the same narrative techniques as Scheherazade of the *Arabian Nights*.

An inundated reading of *Midnight's Children* suggests that Scheherazade actually cannot be an Eastern archetype for Saleem Sinai as a narrator: temporal constraints of their narration make them two diametrically opposed narrators. At the beginning of *Midnight's Children* the narrator declares, “I must work fast, faster than Scheherazade, if I am to end up meaning—yes meaning—something” (*MC* 7). This is a declaration of strategic importance, for it introduces within a sentence a classical Muslim narrator—Scheherazade—while at the same time emphasizing the distinct temporal frameworks. Nancy E. Batty ignores this distinction altogether, for she is intent on proving a link between the two narrators, but this link is challenged by their distinct approaches to time and narration. For Scheherazade time is at a premium, not because she is “disintegrating,” but because she has to die in the morning at the hands of an executioner—she needs to buy more time. Her story, therefore, needs to be endless; it needs to be told all night long, slowly and deliberately without haste, until it reaches its climax at dawn, for that is

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<sup>7</sup> All the critics cited here have produced book-length works on Rushdie. These works are organized as critical reading aids for the students and form part of authors' series of different publishers.

when she is to be executed by the order of the caliph. The slower she tells her story the better it is for her survival, for it buys her time, one night at a time until it accrues to one thousand and one nights. She is not under pressure to end her story before time runs out, but rather to stretch it in order to gain more time. For Saleem, the case is totally reversed—he has only limited time and is trying to compress as many stories as possible within that limited time. He doesn't necessarily need to stretch his story, for that would lead him to an unfinished story before the time runs out. As a narrator, therefore, Saleem earnestly attempts to grasp the story before his time is up. Within this constraint of time Saleem and Scheherazade become two distinctly different narrators and any connection between their narrative techniques could only be established if the critic cares not to foreground the time constraints affecting their narration. The inundated reading, then, helps us understand the novel better and assists us in making more sound connections between the *Arabian Nights* and *Midnight's Children*.

James Harrison considers *Midnight's Children* a pluralistic novel, and pluralism in India, according to him, is “the product of pluralism in Hinduism, whose multiplicity of deities and avatars bears witness to the number of other religions it has been able to incorporate and reincorporate, in contrast to Islam and other monotheisms” (52). Based on this view of Hinduism—the detailed version of which he explains in the first chapter—he goes on to suggest that *Midnight's Children* is “broadly synthetic and Hindu in spirit up to where Saleem loses his memory” (52). There are two things happening in this analysis of *Midnight's Children*: Hinduism stands for acceptance and inclusiveness and Islam, in contrast, automatically becomes insular, unaccepting of others, and of course, as Harrison suggests elsewhere, “uncompromisingly monotheistic” (9).

Harrison, it seems, is trying to trace the differences between two different modes of representation in the novel by retrieving a binary division of the novel's raw materials under the two competing registers of Hinduism and Islam. This leads him to portray Islam as insular and Hinduism as inclusive, an assumption that meshes with popular stereotypes of these religions. However, research into the theory and practice of both religions might help to inundate Harrison's assertion. While Islam might be “uncompromisingly monotheistic” (Harrison 9) in spirit, it is not necessarily a closed social system. In fact, like all other monotheistic religions, Islam also has the capacity to be exclusive and inclusive depending upon the context. Thus, historically, Islam has been quite accepting of the influences from the cultures that it either conquered or interacted with. Hinduism can also be a religion that reveres numerous incarnations of the divine, but also has the most insular and stringent social system of caste prevalent, even today. To read each religion in a fixed and monolithic way is, at the least, problematic. But Harrison's views about Islam, though totally misconceived, tend to normalize metropolitan views. For a teacher of humanities, who must continue to train his or her student's imagination about the global periphery, it

becomes imperative to inundate Harrison's reading of *Midnight's Children* and its raw materials.

Let us first inquire why is it necessary for Rushdie to write about India in a comic epic mode; why can't India be represented in a realistic, linear narrative? While explaining his technique of narrative in *Midnight's Children*, Rushdie has the following to say in one of his earlier interviews:

In a country like India, you are basically never alone. The idea of solitude is a luxury which only rich people enjoy. For most Indians the idea of privacy is very remote. When people perform their natural functions in public, you don't have the same idea of privacy. So it seemed to me that people lived intermingled with each other in a way that perhaps they don't anymore in the west, and that it was therefore idiotic to try and consider any life as being discrete from all other lives. (Durix 13)

The passage cited above is quite important, for it explains Rushdie's personal view of India, the raw materials, and then traces the impact of this view on his art, precisely the making of *Midnight's Children*. This view essentializes India as a static, petrified concept that has not changed through the centuries. The idea of lack of "privacy" and people performing their "natural" functions in public is quite interesting and alarming; it perpetuates the myth of the jostling crowds of India as if there is no room there for people to pause and be alone, not even for a moment, and the other aspect, performing the "natural functions in public" could imply anything from people urinating in public, to copulating on the street.

Through a strategic digression, one could compare the same Rushdie passage to some of the images of the Orient created by Flaubert in his works, as cited by Edward Said in *Orientalism*:

On the road from Cairo to Shubra some time ago a young fellow had himself publically bugged by a large monkey—as in the story above to create a good opinion of himself and make people laugh.

A marabout died a while ago—an idiot—who had long passed as a saint marked by God; all the Moslem women came to see him and masturbated him—in the end he died of exhaustion—from morning till night it was a perpetual jacking off. (Said 103)

My point here is simple: when critics accept Rushdie's claims of representation and match them with previously-held views of the postcolonial fiction, they normalize the old stereotypes of the periphery. By perpetuating myths about the East—in this case India—the critics offer the same public an extended image of the East, which through association with the earlier works could lead them to assume anything. After all, if most people perform their "natural" functions in public, then the possibility of imagining these natural functions is endless, and so is the chance of perpetuating the old myths. In light of the above discussion, it seems that Rushdie is not really debunking any myths but rather perpetuating the same pre-existing myths, while lending them legitimacy of the voice of a cultural informant. Thus, in the realm of postcolonial representation, what could have otherwise been considered a Eurocentric view of some British or European writer has now become the learned and

informed view of a cultural insider: the native informant has been appropriated by the metropolitan critic.<sup>8</sup>

I will now turn to *Shame*, Rushdie's darkest novel. Rushdie has called the novel a dark comedy, a fairytale, and of course his reason for that is simply that to deal with a country like Pakistan, something such as a fairytale was needed. Rushdie says the following about the writing of *Shame*:

The first part of the statement—that India has multiple possibilities—seemed to me to be true, whereas contemporary Pakistan seems to represent a closure of possibilities, a loss of possibilities. That affected not just the tone of voice in the book but also the plotting, because I thought this time I couldn't write an open structured book. The plot became a clamp in which everybody is held: they can't escape from it. Instead of saying, as in *Midnight's Children*, that here is superabundance, one was saying that here is restraint. (Haffenden 51)

Here Rushdie has an imagined version of Pakistan, which could be partially true, but the claim contradicts Rushdie's other stance of *Shame* as a modern fairytale, for what this statement suggests is that *Shame* is rather a mimetic work of fiction told in the style of a grotesque fairy tale. This claim is the main reason why so many critics do not even question the image of Pakistan created in *Shame*. It is because Rushdie provides a plausible reason for the choice of genre and narrative technique of *Shame* in his interviews. And hence the author-critic symbiosis comes into play again. Thus, just as a comic epic was considered suitable for India, a modern fairytale is considered the right genre for dealing with Pakistan.

I will now enumerate some of the stances that various critics have taken about *Shame*. To Goonetilleke, in *Shame*, "Rushdie is portraying a world of evil—not wholly evil, of course, for such a world could not be conceived, but one in which evil preponderates" (66). He also asserts that *Shame* celebrates the ideas of "singularity rather than plurality, religious extremism rather than tolerance, a closure of possibilities rather than multiple possibilities" (47). Damien Grant suggests that one of the "recurrent problems in *Shame* is the instability of its fictional discourse, which in turn has something to do with the instability of Pakistan itself and Rushdie's own ambivalent feelings towards it" (58). Thus, it is quite convenient to suggest that *Shame* isn't really a bad book, it just deals with a reality which is fragmented itself—the reality being Pakistan, about which it is hard to write a work as good as *Midnight's Children*.

Catherine Cundy contends,

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<sup>8</sup> Expectations regarding a Rushdie novel about India do not appear to have changed dramatically. The description on the inner flap of Rushdie's latest novel, *Shalimar the Clown*, declares the following:

Along the way there are tales of princesses lured from their homes by demons, legends of kings forced to defend their kingdoms against evil. There is kindness and there is magic capable of producing miracles, but there is also war—ugly, unavoidable, and seemingly interminable.

As with Rushdie's other fictional enterprises, it is a case of content dictating form. The nature of his arguments demands representation and explication through forms which display a corresponding tone, whether of chaos, confusion, fantasy, or moral or political didacticism. Rushdie desires to tell a cautionary tale about the Pakistani elite in *Shame*—a tale that demonstrates the numerous ills bred by oppression and in which violence and corruption gain their just rewards—and it is this internal compulsion that contributes to the impression of the text as closed, bearing a predetermined argument. (44)

Hence, once again a critic adapts her response to the imagined reality created by the author around the work. She, therefore, is quite comfortable in accepting the Rushdie view that *Shame* is a darker book because it deals with a very dark place called Pakistan. The question of a more compassionate or complex representation does not arise, for the “content” is dictating the way the story must be told. It is instances such as these when the text must become a site of inundation by incorporating particular aspects of Pakistani history, especially the instances that might complicate this reductive view of Pakistan by the writer and the critic alike. The need to inundate works about the Islamic periphery is even more urgent now, in the context of European and American Islamophobia.

Timothy Brennan's response to *Shame* is the most interesting. While analyzing the archetypal roots of the names of the main characters, Brennan suggests that Raza Hyder, the dictator in the story, besides being the thinly-disguised comic version of the real dictator General Zia-ul-Haq, has a compound name sharing attributes of two important terms from the Indian History. Thus, “Raza an alternate form of ‘raja’ of course suggests the Raj—the British governmental authority that ruled India from 1858 to 1947...and Hyder Ali, the infamous ruler of Mysore, a scoundrel and freebooter from the south” (120). In this passage, a character's first name, Raza, which is a Persian name and has no linguistic relationship to Sanskrit Raja—they could not even be cognates and have never been known be cognates—are merged and extended to suggest roots in the British Raj. On the other hand, Hyder Ali, considered a hero by the Indian Muslims for his long fight against the British, is converted from a native hero into someone whom the British see as a freebooter, hence privileging metropolitan history over the history of the periphery. Unless this reading of the novel is inundated with a native view of history, and unless Brennan's linguistic liberties are challenged by a deeper knowledge of Persian and Urdu, we end up with an explanation that only makes sense if read through the metropolitan stereotypes.

In the case of *Shame*, most critics accept Rushdie's representation of Pakistan without question and extrapolate from that assumed truth. Almost all of them tend to think that it is the place—Pakistan—that imposes the style of writing and narrative techniques adopted by Rushdie while writing *Shame*. Hence, *Shame* is read as a form of mimetic fiction that uses fantasy, satire, and grotesquery in coming to terms with a real life situation—its raw materials—so bizarre that it could, in Rushdie's words,

“break a writer’s heart” (*Shame* 68). The dark humor and grotesque fictional world of *Shame*, in fact, becomes a much gentler representation than the real life Pakistan. How can we inundate this broad critical consensus? One must first recognize the two sources of the consensus: the text and Rushdie's own words about the text. One can peruse the text to assess the validity of the reading, but it is also useful to trace Rushdie’s statements outside the text. For instance, Rushdie describes the main idea forming the matrix of *Shame* in this way:

Sharam, that’s the word. For which this paltry ‘shame’ is a wholly inadequate translation... short word, but one containing encyclopedias of nuance... What’s the opposite of Shame? What’s left when Sharam is subtracted? That’s obvious: shamelessness. (*Shame* 33)

Analysing this statement helps one understand how *Shame* is organized and the residual effect of this organized conceptual representation on academic scholarship. First of all, the term *Sharam*, a word from Urdu, is clearly posited as a term the “nuances” of which cannot really be grasped through a translation, for “shame” is, after all, a “paltry” translation. More important, the philosophical paradigm on which this almost untranslatable term is projected is that of Manichean aesthetics. The term as a social construct becomes an ontological condition reducible only with reference to its exact philosophical other—shamelessness—thus easily essentializing the two terms as diametrically opposed. What becomes clear through this rendering of the term “shame” is that there is no gray area, no ambivalence or overlap. One could either be full of shame, or shameless; there is no space between these poles.

This binary view also surfaces in explaining the question of women’s representation in *Shame*. To most of the critics, Rushdie happens to be the champion of Third-World women, for his texts are fraught with stories of women dealing with their “repressed” lives within the postcolonial world. These images are clearly foregrounded in *Shame*. I maintain that the question of women in Rushdie cannot be dealt with without dealing with what most of his texts elide, or do not highlight.

Aijaz Ahmad underscores Rushdie’s unsympathetic representation of women in *Shame*:

What we have, then, is a real disjuncture between particular *episodes* which can delineate quite vivid sympathies for the respective female characters on the one hand, and, on the other, a generalized *structure* of representation in which each of those same characters turns out to be at least dislikeable and frequently repugnant. (104)

Ahmad is quite right here, for the way Rushdie represents women in *Shame* leaves no room for reader’s sympathy. At the most one feels horrified at the choices offered to women, or the ones that they make. Not many critics have, however, indicted Rushdie for his treatment of women. Only a few mention concerns about the representation of women in *Shame*; for instance, Catherine Cundy writes: “The texts declared project to voice the silenced stories of Pakistan’s oppressed women is often

admired by the critics without consideration of the way it is undercut by the representation of the women themselves” (52). But even her discussion is quite inconclusive because it does not cross the limits of mere conjecture to a final indictment of Rushdie. Furthermore, she links Rushdie’s treatment of women to his cultural psyche, which happens to be, in her words, inherently misogynist. Yet another Rushdie apologist, Damien Grant, contests even this mere conjecture. Grant considers Cundy’s criticism of Rushdie a charge brought up simply by “critical reflex” as a consequence of taking Rushdie’s statement within the novel about Omar Khayyam who developed “pronounced misogynistic tendencies at an early age” (Grant 40). Thus, implying that though Omar might have developed these tendencies while growing up in an Islamic culture, Rushdie cannot be charged with the same tendencies, for he has, somehow, escaped this “inescapable” cultural trait of most Muslim, and especially Pakistani men.

The question of women in Rushdie’s fiction cannot be studied without measuring the *silences* of his texts. If read within the construct that Rushdie provides us—the images of women in repressed societies—then the results can be totally misleading. One look at the women in *Shame* is enough to prove that not a single one is capable of true agency. The women in *Shame* are in Goontilleke’s words “not decisive; they are victims and, except for Rani Harappa, powerless” (63). Similarly, Ahmad captures the image of the female representation in the following passage:

In general, moreover, what we find is a gallery of women who are frigid and desexualized (Arjumand the ‘virgin Ironpnts’), demented and moronic...dulled into nullity (Farrah), driven to despair (Rani, Bilquis) or suicide (Good News Hyder)...throughout, every woman, without exception, is represented through a system of imageries which is sexually overdetermined; the frustration of erotic need, which drives some to frenzy and others to nullity, appears in every case to be the central fact of a woman’s existence. (144)

There is something terribly wrong with this representation of the Pakistani woman. In fact, the view that Rushdie is positing is quite alarming, for it elides the agency of more than half the population of Pakistan. Now within the paradigm that Rushdie suggests—the state of women in a repressive society—it might seem possible, but this conclusion can only be reached if one were to believe the Rushdie text as all encompassing and didn’t dwell on what the text elides, what it refuses to talk about. We must therefore inundate the text.

The text, for instance, elides the history of the women’s movement in Pakistan. Regardless of their limited choices in a male-dominant society, women have contributed substantially in the day-to-day existence of Pakistan. While they may not have the same chances or opportunities that women enjoy in the West, they have made great progress. The women’s situation in Pakistan is not a static, fossilized cultural phenomenon, but rather a struggle in flux. *Shame*, of course, takes no account of this, thus petrifying the situation in the imagery of despair, restriction, and total lack

of agency. The elision of female agency needs further scrutiny, as Inderpal Grewal has shown<sup>9</sup> in her own study:

Rushdie's narrative, though admittedly fragmented, fails to account for the very useful and powerful practices of opposition that are occurring in Pakistan today, practices that have been part of the history of women in both Pakistan and India...An often repressed history would reveal that these women are not totally powerless and have successfully worked, through methods that have not been terroristic or violent, for their rights...The Women's Action Forum (WAF) was formed in 1981 in Karachi...The WAF strives for the rights of women as laid down in the Human Rights Charter of the United Nations. (140)

Some critics might argue—and most of them do—that to look beyond the text to disprove Rushdie's stance about women in Pakistan is to suggest the kind of book Rushdie should have written. But that precisely is the point: in the realm of postcolonial representation and interpretation we must go beyond the borders of the text to reach a more nuanced and complicated reading, or else we will end up pandering old stereotypes of the postcolonial in new wrappings. Now if a text were considered an integral whole—as the “old school” New Critics believed—then anything outside the text would be totally irrelevant to an inquiry. But the methods of inquiry have changed; we all know that in a post-Foucauldian, post-Derridian world the text does not exist in isolation. Within such a discursive world one should not be expected to read postmodern works such as Rushdie's novels with the outdated tools of New Criticism. The text, therefore, must be dealt with all its material connotations: it must be stretched to the farthest limit of its hermeneutical structure. Within the current political climate, where the old stereotypes of the periphery are being resuscitated to justify the new agendas of global powers, we must read the texts of the periphery within the larger structure of global and local politics, and we must broaden our discussion of these texts by transporting knowledge available outside the texts, beyond the questions of representation and textual analysis. Inundation, I suggest, is one way of accomplishing such nuanced and complex reading of the texts of the periphery.

In a post-9/11 lecture, Rushdie raised some important questions about the nature of art in an increasingly dangerous world. In this speech, one could say, any assertion of difference in terms of one's socio-cultural sensitivities, according to Rushdie, had created a “short-fuse culture of easy offendedness” (*Step Across* 380). It is not hard to ascertain that for Rushdie this pressure or restriction on artistic activity comes from the so-called conservative Muslim and other communities within Great Britain. Against this aspect of cultural particularity Rushdie posits a claim to a more universalistic nature of literary production, but this universalism presupposes the very erasure of cultural difference within the metropolitan

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<sup>9</sup> Note that the two critics who do point out inconsistencies in Rushdie's representation (Ahmad and Grewal) are located in the periphery, and hence are not completely immersed in the metropolitan critical paradigm.

centers. It is this tendency to universalize and generalize that we must encounter and address in this world of the new empire. This article began with a reference to Gayatri Spivak's new book and its main emphasis on a more nuanced pedagogy—a pedagogy that constantly educates our students about their subaltern others. Inundation, offered as a bricolage and not as method, can help us avoid easy generalizations and impart the kind of imaginary literary education that would make our students and readers into more informed and more compassionate human beings.

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