



Shalimar the Clown in the Context of Global Politics

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Abstract

Rushdie's Shalimar the Clown emphasises on the gradual extinction of the idea of Kashmir as an abode of peace, beauty and harmony. Kashmir in the novel is seen caught between violent and opposing political clashes. In the novel the common people of Kashmir are projected suffering and dying as a result of the antagonisms that are fostered and manipulated by political leaders indirectly from distance. The passing reference to the US intrigues against Russia during the Cold War, the omnipresent power of the United States after the conclusion of the Cold War and the evolution of new ideologies of violence such as the attacks on New York in September 2001 etc. are all interconnected bringing anarchy in the political scenario of Kashmir. All these references are suggestive of the fact that the general Kashmiris are crushed in a three-way power struggle-US dominating tendencies, the intolerance of the Indian army and the Islamic insurgency from Pakistan.

Keywords: *Antagonism, Intrigues, Ideologies, Insurgency, Violence.*

Salman Rushdie's novel, *Shalimar the Clown* (2005), is a sprawling tale of love and revenge unveiling politics in Kashmir through military presence, the neo-imperialist strategies of post-war US foreign policy, economic globalization and violent separatist and terrorist movements with its effect on individual and collective. Rushdie's *Shalimar the Clown* emphasises on the gradual extinction of the idea of Kashmir as an abode of peace, beauty and harmony. Kashmir in the novel is seen caught between violent and opposing political clashes. In the novel the common people of Kashmir are projected suffering and dying as a result of the antagonisms that are fostered and manipulated by political leaders indirectly from distance. Just as Saleem in *Midnight's Children*, the two Kashmiri protagonists of the novel, Shalimar Noman and Boonyi Kaul, are born at the moment of partition and they seem to act as mirrors of post-independence Kashmir and post-independence India. The novel brings out the inherent weaknesses of the US's efforts to establish a global political and economic harmony in the wake of the Second World War. The passing reference to the US intrigues against Russia during the Cold War, the omnipresent power of the United States after the conclusion of the Cold War and the evolution of new ideologies of violence such as the attacks on New York in September 2001 etc. are all

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interconnected bringing anarchy in the political scenario of Kashmir. All these references are suggestive of the fact that the general Kashmiris are crushed in a three-way power struggle-US dominating tendencies, the intolerance of the Indian army and the Islamic insurgency from Pakistan.

At the surface level, *Shalimar the Clown* involves an extra marital love triangle and an extended pursuit of personal revenge by one of its aggrieved parties. The novel is divided into five chapters, each named after one of the main characters such as India, Boonyi, Max, Shalimar the Clown and Kashmiri. Max Ophuls, a married U.S. ambassador to India, falls in love with Boonyi Kaul Noman, a beautiful Kashmiri dancer who is also married. Later on, Max took Boonyi to New Delhi with new hopes and promises. She innocently believes Max and hopes to advance her dancing-career there but she is unaware of the fact that she is actually going to become the mistress of Max who enjoys her for a while and leaves her pregnant. Max's wife, Peggy, outraged by his disloyalty leaves him but adopts Boonyi's baby, Kashmiri whom Peggy renames India. In disgrace Boonyi returns to her Kashmiri village, Pachigam, where she is rejected, declared *mritak* (one of the living dead) and spends the rest of her life alone in an abandoned mountain hut. Meanwhile, Boonyi's husband, Noman Sher Noman, also known as Shalimar the Clown, vows deadly revenge against Max, Boonyi, and the baby, Kashmiri. On the other hand, being associated with several terrorist organizations, Max spends years in professional murderous activities. Meanwhile, Shalimar decides to avenge Max Ophuls and goes to America. He succeeded in killing Max and planned to kill 24 year old India also. The death of Max shocked India so much that she decides to come out from her pampered existence and spends several months working out at a boxing gym in the pursuit of toughening herself. Finally, Shalimar works his way to Los Angeles where India lives. He breaks into her home one night when she is alone. She cuts off the power and retreats to her room where she puts on her night-vision goggles, grabs her bow and arrow and waits. As Shalimar enters with knife in hand, India lets the arrow fly. The novel ends before we see what happens.

Postmodern narratives have been known to interrogate the linear nature of time. However, any such meta-fictional commentary on the relative nature of time is absent in *Shalimar the Clown*. Instead, the manipulation of time in the novel is regulated towards interconnected lives of the characters, and by extension, towards the larger theme of resentment and revenge. The story begins in Los Angeles in 1991, where the 24 year old India makes her entry. She is a proficient athlete and a beautiful, brilliant student. Her biological father, Ophuls, came to India as the US ambassador. Even in his seventies, he romances the hottest stars of Hollywood, Bollywood and takes pleasures in adult entertainment. At the end, he is slaughtered on his daughter's doorstep like 'a halal chicken dinner'.

At this point, the narrative moves back to Pachigam, a small village in Kashmir. The villagers take pleasure in performing the 'Band Pather', clown stories and the traditional plays of the valley. Noman Sher Noman popularly known as Shalimar, the Clown is a performer and tight-rope-walker who falls in love with a beautiful dancer, Bhoomi Kaul, known as Boonyi. Although the two belong to two different religions, they are blessed with marriage. However, Boonyi is not satisfied with her happiness. She is a free unbridled spirit who wants to fulfil her dreams out of her village life. However, this dissatisfaction gives a tragic turn to the love story of Shalimar and Boonyi. She comes under the influence of Max, an American ambassador to India. Mesmerized by Boonyi's beauty Max arranges a dance performance for Boonyi and her friends in Delhi. The show is only a pretext for Ophuls to get

close to her. She has been waiting for such an opportunity. She enters into an extra marital relationship with Max in the hope of a better life. As the relationship starts from a fabricated ground, the attraction starts fading away soon. Boonyi becomes increasingly depressed in her 'liberated captivity'; ultimately, finding solace in drugs. She desperately says:

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. (SC 205)

Thus, it is found that the innocence of life in the valley is gradually betrayed in the name of false hopes and dreams. Betrayal leads to a loss and the loss leads to a crisis of identity and hopes leading to a metamorphosis of life and individual. Not only Boonyi, the innocence of Shalimar also is destructed. To avenge the injustice in his relationship with Boonyi, he joins the extremist, Al-Qaida. He eventually prepares himself for the aim of his life i.e. to kill Maxmillian Ophuls. The fight for a religious cause provides Shalimar the opportunity to go to America. The hypocrisy of terrorism and the bloodshed are well projected in the novel. Rushdie, nodoubt, aims at the regional and international politics acting behind all these terrorist activities.

Shalimar the Clown reflects the history of the socio-political unrest in the valley. The narrative very skilfully juxtaposes the split-lines between the personal and the political. The antipathy that fuels the regressive narrative of *Shalimar the Clown* is entirely personal but its connection with unfolding the historical narrative in the novel uncovers a reassessment of the nature of history. The breakdown of the distinction between the personal and the political in the novel reveals the postmodernist scepticism towards the linearity or the viability of officially recorded history. The presence of history in the narrative of *Shalimar the Clown* is shaped by the personal ventures of the characters in the events around them. The larger historical processes in Kashmir are shown as the magnifications of the personal conflicts of the characters. The novel effectively associates the local with the national. Rushdie's novels, thus, demonstrate a preoccupation with history and the means of challenging its received notion. The novel challenges the hegemonic structure of the national history by highlighting the fact that public history is written, controlled and driven by private stories that make the historical processes meaningful. Historical discourse enters the narrative of *Shalimar the Clown* through the characters' attempts to shape the trajectory of their private destinies. Shalimar's personal resentment forces him to search for Max Ophuls, the American ambassador who came to India in the late 60s and seduced and carried off his wife Boonyi. However, Shalimar's hunt is at one with the participation of great political project of the mutineers demanding independent Kashmir. Boonyi, abandoned and disillusioned by the ambassador, came back to Kashmir only to be treated as an '*mritak*' by the family. In most of his novels, Rushdie delicately weaves his characters' lives into historical allegories. For example, *Midnight's Children* (1981) connects its protagonist's journey of life into India's journey for independence. *The Moor's Last Sigh* is the saga of an eccentric family used as a metaphor for India's recent ups and downs. *Shame* interlinks the stories of two powerful men and tells the tale about a country that was "not quite Pakistan". Following the tradition *Shalimar the Clown* also weaves the toxic love triangle into the fate of Kashmir highlighting the worldwide proliferation of terrorism. The novelist seems to make the point once again

clear that the private and public influence one another and personal experiences often bleed into political actions.

Shalimar the Clown is not about the story of Pachigam only, a small village in Kashmir; it is global in its scope, beginning in and returning at the end to Los Angeles, moving to Kashmir, but also traversing continental Europe and England. Its chief characters, Shalimar, the Clown, Max Ophuls, Boonyi and Kashmira, are closely linked to global developments. As a champion of the hybrid and mongrel, Rushdie does not paint the community of Pachigam as homogenous but multi-coloured and syncretic. In an era of globalization and global diaspora, “familiar lines between “here” and “there,” centre and periphery, colony and metropolis become blurred” (Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands*, 109). By presenting his main characters and settings in the global arena, Rushdie turns down the established discourses and practices by the new emerging processes of cultural hybridism and global migration.

In the novels of Rushdie political conflicts are symbolic of the lives of the characters in the novel. For instance, Western interest in Kashmir is projected by the Europe-born Jewish-American Ambassador, Maximilian Ophuls who in his younger days fought in the resistance against the Nazis but in the later period he became a secret negotiator for American interests around the globe. His involvement in Kashmir is symbolically registered through his association in the life of Boonyi whom he seduces, impregnates and then abandons. On the other hand, Shalimar, her husband, embittered by the loss of his wife, becomes involved in guerrilla conflict. He was trained in Afghanistan and ironically used those weapons that Ophuls himself has provided when the US was covertly arming Islamic terrorists after the Russian invasion in 1979. Hence, Shalimar becomes a murderer and finally murders Ophuls on the doorstep of his daughter’s apartment block. Ophuls’ seduction of Boonyi, and their subsequent relationship, during which he fulfils her daily living needs with expensive goods before abandoning her when he loses interest in her, can clearly be read as an allegory of America’s relationship with other countries. It has been said in the novel that America’s power seduces; its affections imprison; its commodities corrupt; and it abandons once it has taken what it wants. Boonyi, thus, is a symbolic representation of America’s love for the world. In the voice of Boonyi one can hear the voice of Kashmir. She tells Ophuls:

You took beauty and created hideousness ... 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. (SC 188)

Rushdie’s novel satirizes the intentions behind the efforts of the powerful countries to impose a global harmony. Nazi atrocities, as Ophuls argues in conversation with the historian Gaston Zeller, demanded the creation of a “new world order”. The novel also asserts that the noble intentions to create the new world order have been corrupted by the pragmatic and cynical forces. For instance, Max Ophuls, hero of the wartime resistance, whose parents have died in concentration camps and who started his political career as an idealist and optimist, is seen defending the American idea of a free world by manipulating religious facts in unstable regions. He is also seen engaged in covert, strategic arms that deal with the Taliban and al-Qaeda during the Cold war.

Shalimar the Clown can be considered one of the most pessimistic novels as the novel projects nothing that allows hope for Kashmir. There is no hope for the continuity of the idea of a peaceful Kashmir in *Shalimar, the Clown*. The only hope resides in the form of India or Kashmir, a hopeful embodiment of the next generation. The seduction of Kashmir by America has produced a hybrid being, Kashmiri Noman, who lives in America and loves her American father but who is also interested to know what her father really is, what he has done, and who her mother was. The character of Kashmiri indicates that global politics has totally transformed the old Kashmir. Globalisation has generated new ideologies that exist in complex relationships with the power systems in which the possibility of new political reform reside which is neither sympathetic to the US nor faithful to the absolutist militants.

Kashmir, before 1940s, was projected as a paradise with a multi-cultural village tradition and communal tolerance where both Hindu and Muslim reside peacefully. The fact is consolidated by the Shalimar-Boonyi relationship with an unfortunate tragedy in their life. Shalimar is a vibrant Muslim boy whereas Boonyi is a beautiful and talented Hindu girl. The two fall in love and get married in secret because they fear repercussions. The readers' expectations of their union immediately jump to the conclusion that the love-story will come to a sad end as a result of their communal difference and that the novel's crisis will stem from here. The plot of the novel, however, dashed these expectations when the village-elders accepted their relationship permitted their marriage: "We are all brothers and sisters here" (SC 100). Shalimar's father argues:

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. (SC 110)

Rushdie here clearly intends to invoke the idea that Kashmir's problems stem not out from inherent Hindu-Muslim antipathy but from a Hindu-Muslim antipathy that has been brought into being forcefully by political strategies. Through his novel, Rushdie suggests how religion today assumes the shape of a politicized religion. Religion serves as a political actor as well as a mobilizing ideology used by extremists to carry out non-religious ends. In Pachigam, therefore, people of all religions jointly participate in the arts that are the basis of the village's sustenance, and when differences and hostility arise, they are muted by commonality and mutual respect. Rushdie in this regard challenges the idea that cultures should not be perceived as fixed, aloof, unitary and homogenous mass. Indeed, through his novel, Rushdie seems to underscore the fact that "all localities are porous and open-ended, overlap with other such contexts" (SC19).

Shalimar the Clown is a fiction of considerable power where the political commentary is incisive and provocative. The novel very effectively conveys the bitter violence carried out in Pachigam by both Islamic insurgents and the Indian army. Rushdie very dramatically pointed to the political intrigues through a number of questions which were never answered but were open for interpretation.

There were six hundred thousand Indian troops in Kashmir but the pogrom of the pandits was not prevented, 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? (SC 297)

Such question-asking is a unique characteristic feature to deal with the political events in Rushdie's novels. Indeed, it serves as one of the poignant strategy to bring out the political pitfalls through his novels. Rushdie, however, does not make any effort to offer the answers and in accordance no direct responses are offered to the pertinent questions posed in *Shalimar the Clown*. Nodoubt, this strategy heightened the dramatic effect of the novel. Moreover, Rushdie's question-asking strategy serves two constructive political functions too. In the first place, the very act of posing the question constitutes a potent political gesture: a demand for attention and a demand for redress. In the second place Rushdie's question-asking 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.

Shalimar the Clown very prominently mirrors the burning problem of terrorism in the contemporary world and brings forth the regional, national and international impact on politics. The rise of terrorism in Kashmir is the product of multiple complex factors. The novel depicts the rise of terrorism built on a tragic love story of Shalimar and Boonyi. Boonyi-Shalimar love story can be seen as a node through which the issue of 'terrorism' has entered into the plot. When Max came to Kashmir as an American ambassador, he was fascinated by the beauty of Boonyi Kaul. Boonyi was aware of it and it eventually awakens a secret desire in Boonyi. Thus, she is entrapped by Max and leaves her husband behind. The beautiful love story thus takes a tragic turn. Shalimar becomes obsessed with the desire for revenge and sets his heart on killing the couple. The initial Boonyi-Shalimar represents Kashmir as a paradise with multicultural tolerance and harmony. However, the entrance of Max into the paradise give it a tragic turn. The novel, thus, justifies how personal experiences often bleed into political actions. Although years later Boonyi returns to her homeland, she was declared dead by the villagers. Her return sets a fire on Shalimar. The old memories with his beloved tortured his mind. Interestingly, political scenario at the time became worse dramatically and rebels were growing high. Shalimar left Pachigam and he was not seen in village for next fifteen years. As a result of his personal animosity with Max, Shalimar becomes involved with a group of terrorists inspired by Al Qaida. The innocent clownish performer can be seen transformed into a cold blooded terrorist in the process. The story well stipulates how an innocent lover turned murderous and avenger. From a paradise Kashmir becomes an abode of ghastly violence. It is an irony of the fact that when violence bursts out it is not the strangers that are involved in the very act of violence but it is our near and dear ones, the people with whom may be we had shared our life. Nodoubt, Rushdie has given vivid description of the global and political consequences of human emotions such as love, betrayal and revenge. But it is not all about that.

Shalimar the Clown points out to the various new terrorists groups upholding training camps like FC-22 and ISI. It depicts how Lashker-e-Pak also known as Army of the Pure focused on certain aims including moral as well as political. LeP circulated posters ordering Muslim women to put on the burqa and adhere to the dress and behavioural principles laid down by the Taliban in Afghanistan. Kashmiri women have to suffer because of this kind of suppression. This novel not only criticizes terrorism in his novel but also the role of Indian militancy towards the people of Kashmir is also criticized. The security forces imposed curfew to control violence. The faces of soldiers expressed anger and hatred. It would be relevant here to quote the following lines from the text:

The political echelon had sent word. *Every Muslim in Kashmir should be considered a militant. The bullet was the only solution.* Until the militants were wiped out normality could not return to the valley. General Kachhwaha smiled. Those were instructions he could follow. (SC 291)

The people of Kashmir start believing in fake *Azadi* (freedom). Half of Kashmir starts fighting for Kashmir for the Kashmiris while the other half wanted Pakistan and demanded to be a part of the Islamic country. The radicals started killing each other for their motives. The Kashmiri Pandits were forced to leave their ancestral homes due to the outbreak of violence by the militancy. Hit lists were prepared by the containing names of the Pandits to be killed. Warnings were given to Pandits by the terrorists to leave the Valley immediately. Hence, the migration began for life's sake. Almost the entire Pandit population of Kashmir fled from their homes and headed south to the refugee camps. Although there were several Indian troops in Kashmir but they were not able to prevent this flight. The hatred, misunderstanding and violence were increasing day by day. This novel not only describes the terror of terrorism but also argues whether terrorism can be controlled by force and power. Crackdowns were made against insurgency. In the novel there are many incidents of crackdowns. The crux of the fact is that the common people have to suffer whether it is a terrorist attack or a way to control the terrorism. Pachigam could not escape itself from crackdown; it only exists on the official maps of Kashmir.

The death of the innocence in the valley is represented through the transcultural love story of Shalimar and Boonyi. However, Rushdie's critique is double-edged. The novel is not only a lament on the destruction of communal harmony and loss of innocence but it is a warning to the pluralists not to forget the mutual consequences of all disasters. Parallel flashbacks take us back to Max Ophuls's early days in Nazi-occupied Strasbourg. Max's flamboyant heroism in the French resistance anticipates and serves as an interesting counterpoint to Shalimar's guerrilla tactics. Textual parallels and mirroring strategies similar to this connect temporally and spatially disconnected parts of the novel, leaving the reader with the impression of listening to a twice-told tale. Max's daughter India's desire to seek justice for her father's death appears to be a re-enactment of Max's own wish to avenge his parents' death in a Nazi concentration camp, which he did by joining the French Resistance Movement.

There are some epiphanic moments in the text that create sensational realization. Shalimar sees the reflection of the mother in the daughter in his encounter with India. This epiphanic moment derails the desire for revenge to murder India and the moment is marked by a vague wish to actually have her (Boonyi) back at the moment of encountering India.

When he saw her, when those green eyes speared him, he began to tremble ... she's alive. He didn't know what he wanted. She was living in America now and by some miracle she was twenty-four years old again, mocking him with her emerald eyes, she was the same and not the same, but she was alive again. (SC 323)

However, when India finally learns that Shalimar had killed both of her parents, she underestimates the futility of his violence by emphasizing to him that both her parents are resurrected in her and that she continuously asserts it in her letters to Shalimar when he was

in his death row in San Quentin. The reincarnation of Max and Boonyi is not only India's textual genetic legacy but the incarnation of a New India through the character of India:

You wanted to wipe them out but you failed, you killed nobody. Here I stand.
I am my mother and my father I am Maximillain Ophuls and Boonyi Kaul.
They are not dead not gone not forgotten. (SC 379)

The representation of past and contemporary history is intensely intertwined with the characters' attempts to shape the course of their personal lives. Max Ophuls' parents were captured by the Nazis and this particular turning point of his life transforms him into one of the most flamboyant figures of the French Resistance. Similarly, Shalimar's personal grievances in his married life prompted his involvement with terrorist groups seeking the liberation of Kashmir.

Counter histories are built against the official history of Kashmir from which violence and bloodshed are painstakingly erased. Readers bear witness to one such erasure when Shalimar's village Pachigam is razed to the ground in a crackdown operation by the Indian army. Not only is the actual physical locus destroyed and its inhabitants killed, but the act of destruction itself is erased from the official history of Kashmir. Ironically, the village continues to exist on the map of Kashmir, although the violence that erased it is deliberately suppressed in successive attempts. When India visits Kashmir to find out more about her mother, she encounters the remains of Pachigam and learns about its destruction, a narrative that becomes interchangeable with the obliterated memory of Boonyi's murder. Memory, resentment and revenge once more become instrumental in uncovering buried stories and histories.

How far evil may evolve into can never abolish the life force entirely. It lives on the hearts of people like it does in Kashmira. Kashmira's killing of Shalimar reflects Rushdie's future vision of the world where only peace prevails. Therefore, the novel represents a new life and a new beginning with the dissolution of all divisions and segments. The multicultural and hybrid world is welcomed on the horizon that has no place for any kind of divisions or borders. Uninterestingly, Rushdie finishes the novel with the idea that all divisions dissolve and disintegrate paving the way for the reign of Humanism and for the victory of the essential life force present in all of us. Kashmira embodies the advent of a new inception from the chaos and turmoil of betrayal to the arrival of a bright new dawn, full of hope and regeneration. Her presence is an indication the author tries to delineate 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.

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