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Historical and Political Elements in Salman Rushdie's *Shame*

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Abstract:

Very few things in the world of today are left unaffected by historical forces. An essential thing for historical fiction is that it is set in the past and pays attention to the events, situations, manners, social conditions and other details of any particular period. Authors also frequently choose to explore notable historical figures in these settings, allowing readers to better understand how these individuals might have responded to their environments. There are historical elements used by writers like historical events, names or a historical element in a novel. No sensible writer can afford to be oblivious of them. Salman Rushdie is also one of them.

World history is full with a lot of political, geographical events and incidents. Salman Rushdie uses these two themes in approximately in all his novels. History and politics are Rushdie's prime concern and almost every novel written by him deals both issues at length and this is the reason, that, Rushdie involves approximately every aspect from the Indian politics and history during his time. Rushdie's theory of the history and politics make his novels different from other novelists. This paper will explore the uses of historical and political elements in the earlier novels in Salman Rushdie.

Keywords: Historical names, Historical places, Political history of India and Pakistan

Introduction

Salman Rushdie, a Bombay born and London-based novelist, stands among the world's best contemporary novelists such as- Gunter Grass, Milan Kundra and V. S. Naipaul. Salman Rushdie was born on June 19, 1947 in Bombay (same year and place where his hero Saleem Sinai was born) in a Muslim family that was liberal and grew up in a villa above Warden

Road, a privileged part of the city. In 1954, the novelist attended English Mission School in Bombay but his father decided to take him out from that school and in 1961 he was sent to England for his secondary education, at Rugby school. In 1968, he returned to Pakistan and worked briefly in a television before returning to London. From Rugby Rushdie went to Cambridge, like his father, to read history and he took a degree in history in 1968 from there. Meanwhile, in 1964, his family moved to Karachi, Pakistan, seventeen years after the Independence of India, and birth of Salman and two new countries - India and Pakistan. So, I can say that Salman Rushdie was very much familiar with these two nations and he wrote too much about the history and politics of these two nations.

Very few things in the world of today are left unaffected by historical forces. No sensible writer can afford to be oblivious of them. Salman Rushdie is also one of them. About the effect of history Walter Allen rightly remarks:

“In the literature of an age, its conflicts, tendencies, obsessions are uncovered and made manifest to a degree which is continually astonishing..... its nervous system, coursing of its blood and the unconscious promptings and conflicts which sway it”. (Pathak 19)

History and politics are Rushdie's prime concern and almost every novel written by him deals both issues at length and this is the reason, that, Rushdie involves approximately every aspect from the Indian politics and history during his time. Rushdie's theory of the history and politics make his novels different from other novelists. About his attitude towards history Alan Lindsay wrote - “His theory of the novel, his understanding of the way the novel functions in history, makes it not surprising that if some living novelists were going to produce a novel that was the first of that genre in anyone's memory to become the lead story on the international news, it would be him.” (Lindsay 171)

Historical and Political Elements in the Novel

Shame (1983) is a very famous novel written by Salman Rushdie. This novel was awarded the winner of the French Prix du Meilleur Livre Etranger. It is true that much the writer may try to fictionalize the factual events of the story collected from history, the novel seems to cover the time span of thirty-six years – that is from the partition and birth of the new country in 1947 to 1983, 1983 was the year of the publication of the novel *Shame* also. S.K. Tikoo rightly writes - “While the writer weaves the story of the fictional country, he

thinks he is writing about he also furnishes sufficient details of the contemporary history of Pakistan, India etc”. (Tikoo 48) Salman Rushdie in his novels, writes about many countries, but he specially writes about India and Pakistan. As he was born in India and his family was living in Pakistan, so it might be a reason that he wrote a lot of things on the history of these two countries. Rushdie is also aware of all the situations and conditions in which these two countries were separated. He also knows that these two countries are the great rivals of each other.

In his third novel ‘Shame’, hero Omar Khayyam Shakil, he is very interesting person. Hero has three mothers and he himself does not know who his real mother is. So, he is very confused. After hearing news his tension grows – “Two years later, his mothers wrote to tell him that he had a brother, whom they had named Babar after the first Emperor of the Mughals who had marched over the impossible mountains and conquered wherever he went.” (Rushdie 56)

As we know Rushdie was a good student of history so his command on history whether it was old or new, is very great and so he involves it in his writings. Rushdie can hardly retain to himself horrors, which the political reality of Pakistan inspires. He shows the private reality of the emotional apprehension of the political drama of Pakistan. Rushdie narrates the conditions and situations of the politics and politicians of Pakistan. O.P. Mathur rightly said – “Rushdie himself is neither a historian nor an eye – witness of the events.” (Mathur 23) He was right, but Rushdie describes the things in such a beautiful way due to his knowledge of history. In the novel, Rushdie Confesses – “If this were a realistic novel about Pakistan, I would not be writing about Bilquis and the wind; I would be talking about my youngest sister.” (Rushdie 68) It can be said that it is a novel about Pakistan because in this novel Salman Rushdie describes the politician of Pakistan and States of Pakistan. Rushdie describes different scenes and situations pertaining to Pakistan-for example, the long-ago Deputy Speaker who was killed in the National Assembly when the furniture was flung at him by elected, representatives; the film censor who took his red pencil to each frame of the scene in the film Night of the Generals in which General Peter.

Toole visits an art gallery, and scratched out all the paintings of naked ladies hanging on the walls, so that audiences were dazzled by the surreal spectacle of General Peter strolling through a gallery of dancing red blobs; about the issue of Times Magazine (or was it News week ?) which never got into the country because it carried an article about President

Ayub Khan's alleged Swiss bank account; the bandits on the trunk roads who are condemned for doing, as private enterprise, what the government does as public policy; genocide in Baluchistan; preferential awards of State scholarships to pay for postgraduate studies abroad, to members of the fanatical Jamaot Party; the extra hangings – the first twenty years - that were ordered purely to legitimize the execution of Mr. Zulfikar Ali Butto; about Bhutto's hangman who has vanished into thin air, all find place in the novel *Shame* further he asks his readers to imagine his difficulty in describing Pakistan's “anti-Semitism, an interesting phenomenon, under whose influence people who have never met a Jew vilify all Jews for the sake of maintaining solidarity with the Arab states which offer Pakistan workers,.....or about the apportioning of the national budget, with special reference to the percentages set aside for defence (huge) and for education (not huge). Imagine my difficulties!” (Rushdie 70)

In ‘*Shame*’ Sufiya Zinobia, who was born in Karachi city, was the first daughter of Captain Raza and Bilquis who later becomes the wife of the unpoetical bastard hero Omar Khayyam Shakil- “Scattering asides on literature and politics as he goes, tucking small stories into larger ones. Rushdie wends his way through the histories of Omar and Sufiya, Pakistan and its ruling families.” (Stine and Marowski 355)

Further in the novel Rushdie, he says that he is talking about two big political families of Pakistan and once again he explores the political relationship between India and Pakistan. S.K. Tikoo rightly remarks “Being himself an escapist both from India and Pakistan and an immigrant settled in London, the writer cannot avoid the impact on his sensitive, imaginative mind of the conflict between the two types of reality: the reality of India and the reality of Pakistan, the democratic realities in one and the reality of military rule in the other.” (Tikko 52)

According to Rushdie, Pakistani politicians do everything for their benefit whether it is to kill his daughter or it is to give someone their seats - “When his notion of ‘Islamic Socialism’ and of a close alliance with China had gained such wide public support that he was effectively running the nation's foreign policy without even being a member of the cabinet, President A had had no option but to invite him into the government.” (Rushdie 141)

In the novel *Shame* we see some portion of real political history came alive in certain portions of the narrative. The cousin-in-law, Raza Hyder and Iskander Harappa, have moved on to the national political scene. Raza after getting the post of a colonel, demands powers

from the state Chief Minister Gichki, a favourite of the local tribal's, to crush resistance of the tribal guerrillas to the government control. Meanwhile Baber Shakil, Omar's brother is gunned down in the raid on the insurgents. So, we can say that this novel is a - "Fictionalized picture of the ideas of Rushdie about Pakistan." (Bhatt 64)

Rushdie explains the father's desire to kill his daughter in the name of honour. A Pakistani father killed his beloved daughter for making love to a white boy in London. Rushdie also writes shameful history of the Pakistani leaders by describing the story of Miss Arjumand Harappa, whom he called 'Virgin Iron pants.

After the election, the real trouble, started over in the East Wing. Perfidy of the East, proved by the popular Front's failure to win a single seat there, while the riff-raff of the people's league, led by the well-known incompetent Sheikh Bismillah, gained so overwhelming a victory that they ended up with more Assembly seats than Harappa had won. Rushdie rightly remarks - "Give people democracy and look what they do with it." (Rushdie 179)

This is the thinking of Pakistani politicians according to Salman Rushdie, he writes – "It was the year of the general election. After six years in power, Iskandar Harappa and the Popular Front were campaigning hard. Opposition was fierce, however: Isky's rivals had united to give him a tough fight." (Rushdie 216) Rushdie says that opposition never accepts the results of elections due to their ego-problem. About the involvement of Pakistani politics in the novel, Dr. Syed Mujeebuddin says, – "In superb parody and burlesque Rushdie recreates the major strands of the contemporary history of Pakistan, and tells the story of a very small group of people who are 'responsible for the making of history and for the controlling of power' and for whom politics is a kind of family drama." (Bhatnagar and Rajeshwar 104-105)

This is a story in which there are boundaries between fiction and truth, imaginative story and politics and history.

Conclusion

In the novel 'Shame' Salman Rushdie shows the real face of Pakistani history, how they increase terrorism –

Of those who have attained the position of prince by villainy,' Iskander's voice whispered in his ear, 'IL Principe, chapter eight, you ought to read it; it's very short, 'but by this time Raza had worked out how to ignore his sinister of left sided dead angle. He blotted out Isky's mischief-making, and instead of nothing the historical precedents offered by the histories of Agathocles the Sicilian and Oliverotto da Fermo he listened to Maulana Dawood (Rushdie 248).

The novelist explores in depth the Iskander Raza's plot a very macho bookall about careerism, cops, politics, revenge, assassinations, excursions, blood and guts. He even presents various strategies employed by these two families – Raza Hyder and Iskander Harappa. He comes out overtly how shame is the results of excessive humiliation and that it certainly leads to violence. Naturally politicians who take recourse to the methods of repression are bound to fall one day or the other.

Thus, the theme of *Shame* “as depicted through the book takes on a zigzag trajectory, with interesting results.” (Taneja and Dhawan 95)

Rushdie tells about the time when Raza Hyder, in the novel, was the President. He writes: “When Raza Hyder had been President for nearly four years, the white panther started coming closer to the capital. That is to say, the murders and animal-slayings grew closer together, the sightings grew more frequent, and the stories linked up with each other and formed a ring around the city.” (Rushdie 257)

According to Rushdie, people in countries like Pakistan, grow upon a diet of honour and shame. Rushdie uses important technique to reinforce the impression that politics dehumanizes human beings and makes them so different from what we understand by the term ‘human’ that they appear to us as stranger. So, the novel, explores the real situations of the politics of Pakistan – “In positing the real with the fantastic and story with history Rushdie is actually presenting the reader with an ‘anti-history’: for unlike conventional histories that describe golden ages and glorious conquests, his tale about Pakistan is one where ‘clowns and goons play(ing) out the plots of high tragedies.” (Bhatnagar and Rajeshwar 108)

So, we can say that Salman Rushdie explores the history and politics of Pakistan in a manner as he himself was the part of it. His talent, to describe the historical and political elements of Pakistan, is very effective and impressive.

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