



Metamorphosis and Memory in Salman Rushdie's *Shalimar the Clown*

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Abstract:

This paper explores the themes of metamorphosis and memory in Salman Rushdie's *Shalimar the Clown*, situating it within the broader framework of postcolonial literature and cultural hybridity. Rushdie vividly dramatises the transformations of individuals caught between love, betrayal, and political violence through the interlaced lives of Shalimar, Boonyi, and Max Ophulus. The narrative reveals how personal transformation – Shalimar's descent from lover to terrorist, Boonyi's fall from beauty to ruin, Max's shift from resistance hero to seducer, and India's journey from fragmented identity to self-realisation- mirrors the collective disintegration of Kashmir from a paradise of pluralism into a site of terror and despair. Memory serves as both a burden and a means of redemption, allowing India/Kashmira to recover her broken legacy and represent hope for the revival of Kashmir. The study underscores Rushdie's vision of human suffering, resilience, and the possibility of regeneration amidst historical trauma by tracing these transformations.

Keywords: Metamorphosis, Memory, Identity and Hybridity.

Salman Rushdie is the most popular writer among contemporary novelists. He has influenced an entire generation of Indo-Anglian writers and their writings. He is a leading writer in postcolonial literature. He is best known for his novel *Midnight's Children*, which won the Booker Prize in 1981. Most of his fiction is set on the Indian subcontinent. He is the master of combining magical realism with historical fiction; his work is concerned with the many connections, disruptions and migrations between East and West. This paper explores how metamorphosis and memory function as vital motifs in the characterisation of the novel *Shalimar the Clown*.

Salman Rushdie's novel *Shalimar the Clown* closely examines politics, culture, history and love. The novel is magnificently blended with modern thriller, epic, courtroom, slapstick comedy, wartime adventure, political satire and village legend. The story opens with the horrific murder of an elder, who is an international celebrity named Maximilian Ophuls, a former United States ambassador to India.

The central character, India, is an illegitimate child of Maximilian Ophuls. She is a documentary filmmaker. Her slumber is disturbed by longing for the Kashmiri mother she never knew. Her father, Max Ophuls, is murdered by his chauffeur, Shalimar and runs away. Investigators initially conclude that it is a political hit: just the day before, Max had emerged from a long public silence to deliver a criticism of the destruction of Kashmir. The murderer is soon revealed, and it comes to light that Shalimar is an international terrorist, born and trained in Kashmir. However, Max's daughter discovers that the motive behind her father's murder is far more personal and frightening than it first appears. At this point, the novel shifts back to the little Kashmiri village of Pachigam. The title *Shalimar the Clown* refers to a character named Noman Sher Norman, who performs a tightrope act for amusement. He is the son of a Muslim theatre troupe leader, Abdullah. The fourteen-year-old Shalimar falls deeply in love with Boonyi, a Hindu

girl. She is the daughter of Pandit Pyarelal Kaul. Her real name is Bhoomi, which means “the earth.”

The lovers are part of a secular Kashmiri society of performers and cooks. The two religions coexist peacefully in this town and borrow from one another; the Muslims adopt the Hindu's gods and superstitions, while the Hindus learn to include meat in their daily cooking. Nevertheless, when the relationship between Shalimar and Boonyi is exposed, it is a test of the villagers' tolerance. Stern voices on both sides condemn the teenagers' impure mingling of faiths, but the parents agree to a marriage ceremony that includes both Hindu and Muslim customs. The union of these two young people becomes a symbol of the true Kashmiri spirit, which Rushdie polishes into a hauntingly beautiful and, it would seem, increasingly elusive goal for the rest of the world.

Things come to a turn in the lovers' lives when Boonyi dances in the troupe's performance for the guest of honour, Max Ophuls, the American ambassador to India; he is overcome with desire. Boonyi betrays her devoted Shalimar by offering herself to Max. With one of his assistants, Edgar Wood, Max gets her a flat in Delhi, and an affair blooms. Boonyi gets pregnant, and Max is forced to return. Her child, India, is brought to England by Max's wife, Margaret Ophuls.

Boonyi's betrayal leads Shalimar on a tragic course. Unable to bear her betrayal, Shalimar spends the rest of his life taking revenge on the people who are the cause of his unhappiness. He joins up with various Jihadi organisations and becomes a renowned assassin. Max, a hero of the French resistance movement in World War II, becomes the American ambassador for counterterrorism, a euphemism for covert operations. Shalimar reaches America and works as Max's driver for some time. Suddenly, one day, he murders Max and runs away. Then he is caught and sentenced to death.

In the novel, Rushdie, like a fate, plays the game of metamorphosis. In an interview about this novel, he stated that “it’s always difficult to create characters who don’t think the way you think” (“Interview with Salman Rushdie”). A close study of the novel's major characters reveals how Rushdie has prepared for their metamorphosis. Each of the principal characters transforms over time. Significantly, Rushdie himself provides a list of these characters as a chapter title, and the present study proceeds to analyse it.

India, an illegitimate child of Max, loves her father because she has nobody to love. She dislikes her name being called “India”. She wants to know the truth about her Kashmiri mother. After the murder of her father, she learns about her Kashmiri mother through Margaret Ophuls. Her Kashmiri mother, Boomi, has named her Kashmira Noman. At that moment, the writer hints at the transformation in her, to the readers, as follows: “She felt as if the weight of her body had suddenly doubled, as if she had suddenly become the woman in the photograph. Gravity dragged at her... Kashmira. The weight of the word was too much for her to bear” (Rushdie 354). “She is a hybrid being, living in America, loving her American father, but discovering who her father really was, what he had done, and who her mother was” (Kumar Singh 9).

Having grown close to her father in his last years, India learns the other side of Max Ophuls. She moves to Kashmir in search of her birth mother but finds only her mother’s grave. She hates Shalimar, her mother’s husband, who has killed her father and mother. She makes a sort of consolation that the killer “had taken her father but her mother was being given to her” (Rushdie 340). However, she cannot control her anger against Shalimar. So, she writes to him as “Here I stand. I am my mother and my father I am Maxmilian Ophuls and Boonyi Kaul. You achieved nothing. They are not dead not gone not forgotten. They live on in me” (Rushdie 379). The transformation of India Ophuls into Kashmira Ophuls is clearly revealed in the novel. Even Rushdie refers to her transformation as “She stood by her mother’s grave and something got into

her” (Rushdie 366). Kashmir lingers in her, and so “She no longer saw this as an American story. It was a Kashmiri story. It was hers” (Rushdie 372).

Shalimar’s promise to murder Boonyi and Max also included any offspring they might have produced in their liaison. As it turns out, the couple had a daughter, called Kashmira by her mother but baptised as India by her father. “India/Kashmira, unaware of her Kashmiri ancestry, feels a doubleness she cannot comprehend. In the final scene, she awaits Shalimar in her residence, armed with her crossbow and night-vision goggles, while he relies only on instinct” (Martins 63-64). At the end of the novel, she is found at her residence, which has just been broken into by Shalimar.

She felt the taut bowstring pressing against her parted lips, felt the foot of the arrow’s shaft against her gritted teeth ... exhaled and let fly. There was no possibility that she would miss. There was no second chance ... There was only Kashmira, and Shalimar the clown. (Rushdie 497)

Pandit Pyarelal Kaul’s only daughter Boonyi falls in love with Shalimar. They are fourteen when they are embraced with love. Their secret love affair is revealed to the public by Gopinath, Pandit Kaul’s cousin. They are brought to the panchayat, but to their surprise, the people grant this Hindu-Muslim marriage. 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” (Rushdie 110). However, “Boonyi, like Eve, is easily tempted and eagerly accepts the Ambassador’s offer of a change in her life” (Mathur 92). She betrays Shalimar to live with Max, yet “she could not get her cuckold husband out of her mind” (Rushdie 196). Her life changes once she comes to Delhi; she consumes opium: “After that she

curled herself into the metamorphic smoke whenever she could” (Rushdie 201). Then her narcotic of choice turns out to be food: “She took to gluttony with the same bottomless enthusiasm she has once for sex, diverting the immense force of her erotic requirements from her bed to her table” (Rushdie 204). 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. (Rushdie 205)

There is a transformation in her physique that takes place: “her beauty dimmed. Her hair lost its luster, her skin coarsened, her teeth rotted, her body odour soured, and her bulk increased steadily” (Rushdie 203). After her pregnancy, “A baby changed things” (Rushdie 205). She gave birth to a baby daughter and named her Kashmira Noman. She now wants to return to Kashmir, her home, with her baby. Margaret Ophuls takes the baby with her. Boonyi reaches Kashmir but is rejected by the people there; she lives a lonely life in the mountains. Another transformation happens; her physical labour hardens her shoulders and flattens her belly. “This third-phase Boonyi was beautiful in a new way, the bruised, life-hardened, imperfect way of an adult woman” (Rushdie 241). Finally, Shalimar kills her as he warned her the very first night they made:

Don’t you leave me now, or I’ll never forgive you, and I’ll have my revenge, I’ll kill you and if you have any children by another man I’ll kill the children also.” But Boonyi heard only the voice of his devotion: “what a romantic you are,” she replied carelessly. “You say the sweetest things. (Rushdie 61)

Saurabh Kumar Singh, in his article, “Salman Rushdie’s *Shalimar the Clown*: Tragic Tale of a Smashed World”, comments: “In the character of Boonyi we find the eagerness for liberation, lured by which she symbolizing Kashmir, loses herself courting destruction” (6).

Max Ophuls is a member of a wealthy, cultured, conservative and cosmopolitan family. Born and brought up in Paris, he looks after his family's printing business and works as a junior professor of Economics at a University. During World War II, he escapes to America and marries Margaret Rhodes. Becoming an American ambassador, he moves to India, where he falls into an unexpected romantic infatuation with a Kashmiri girl, Boonyi. Her affair with her becomes scandalous, and so he leaves her with Edgar Wood to care for. Once Boonyi gives birth to his baby, he accepts the child. He provides all comforts and love to his daughter till his sudden death. He even helps Shalimar, his lover’s husband, and provides him a job as his driver. But he is killed by Shalimar.

Noman Sher Noman, Shalimar the clown, is a serious lover. “He is the only person who can recognize what it is: his self-inflicted curse of becoming the killer of those who had destroyed his previous self” (Martins 57). His love for Boonyi is so passionate that he warns her not to leave him. The reason for loving Shalimar, as Boonyi says, “because he would not- - he could not! – hurt any living soul. How could he cause her harm when he would not harm a fly?” (Rushdie 50). They have married and led a happy family. Abdullah, his father, teaches him the mystery of the tightrope act, saying, “A rope could become air. A boy could become a bird. Metamorphosis was the secret heart of life” (Rushdie 55-56). After Boonyi’s betrayal, his faith “rope” becomes invisible like “air” and he turns into a hunting bird. A person who “would not harm a fly” transforms into a bloody killer. Though his anger can be admitted, his thirst for revenge makes him a serial killer and terrorist.

Shalimar brings his vision of these forces to the foreground of the novel when he runs into his mother, after being missing for some time, and tells her, through metaphor, how he has been “sleeping” all those years as a tightrope walker:

I’ve been looking at bad things for so long that I’d stopped seeing them, but I’m not sleeping now and I see how it is: the real bad dream starts when you wake up, the men in tanks who hide their faces so that we don’t know their names and the women torturers who are worse than the men ... and the people made of bullets and the people made of lies and they are all here to do something important, namely to fuck us until we are dead. And now that I’ve woken up there is something important I need to do ... (Rushdie 309)

This passage makes it clear that Shalimar has a sense of self that clashes with the accepted wisdom on the motivations of modern jihadis and terrorists, according to which they are stripped of volition by means of indoctrination and promises of rewards in heaven. Shalimar is working on a really earthly, clear-cut, personal mission, and he is never made to sound clownish or brainless anywhere in the novel. It must be repeated, however, that “the book does not justify his venom but merely acknowledges it and tries to locate and name it” (Martins 58). There is another transformation which Amit Rai also seems to think:

I believe the ethical possibility of linking terrorism to monstrosity at this particular historical moment lies in the transformation of the cultural and historical experience of the unacceptable, which calls forth all the technologies of normalization, discipline and biopower. If part of what is at stake today is the creation of normalized subjects of a global community arrayed against evil, a meditation on monstrosity enables us to imagine another kind of future by bringing back the trauma of history. Monstrosity, then, is an event that transforms both the idea and experience of culture and history. (554)

This novel, as Cowley puts it, “Rushdie writes with sadness for the lost ideal of Kashmir, and of much of the Muslim world—the ideal of tolerance and secular pluralism” (27).

Rushdie has beautifully presented the transformation in his major characters. A cuckold clown becomes a terrorist because of uncontainable hurt and frustration with the Kashmiri resistance; a World War II hero, Max, becomes a seducer because he cannot stand the desperate look of desire in a woman’s eyes. Boonyi, a wife, becomes a mistress to secure a better life for herself and her children. Rushdie wonderfully gives the reason for human suffering: “Only man’s character is suspect and shifting. Only Man, knowing good, can do evil. Only Man wears masks. Only Man is a disappointment to himself” (Rushdie 92).

The transformation is not only found in the characters, but also in the place, Kashmir, the earthly paradise; as Rushdie presents, it turns to a hell at the end of the novel. Kumar Singh infers this transformation of Kashmir, stating:

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 (3)

Rushdie also tries to indicate that Kashmir is no longer a paradise, and the original Kashmiri society no longer exists. The fear and the terror of the place are expressed: “Everyone carries his address in his pocket so that at least his body will reach home” (Rushdie 305). Moreover, a Kashmiri says, “I do not think I will stay in Kashmir, I do not want to watch the sadness destroying the beauty” (Rushdie 87). Even when the girl India comes to Kashmir, she thinks, “[Had] she come to Kashmir to be reborn or to die” (Rushdie 357).

Rushdie does not finish his game of metamorphosis with death, because “The question of death is also the question of life, and the question of how to live is a question of love. That is the question you have to go on answering, to which there is not answer except in the going on” (Rushdie 83-84). Still, Rushdie believes, “The snow would melt and new flowers would grow. Death was not the end” (Rushdie 83).

In *Shalimar the Clown*, Rushdie skillfully interlaces metamorphosis and memory into the fabric of his characters and the landscape of Kashmir itself. Each transformation—whether Shalimar’s vengeance, Boonyi’s decline, Max’s moral compromise, or India’s reclamation of identity—embodies the fragility of human choices and the weight of historical memory. Kashmir, once a symbol of harmony, becomes a metaphor for fractured identities and lost ideals. However, through India/Kashmir’s assertion of her heritage and her confrontation with Shalimar, Rushdie gestures toward renewal, suggesting that memory, though painful, can also be the seed of regeneration. The novel thus closes not in despair but in the possibility of rebirth, affirming that even in the ruins of betrayal and violence, the human spirit can rediscover love, identity, and hope.

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