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The Uncanny Maternal Body in *Shalimar the Clown*: Exploring Violence and Resistance

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Abstract:
The maternal body is a space where something soothingly familiar collapses into something terribly alien or unfamiliar. As an entity that is divisible and uncontrollable, the maternal body often evokes a particular fear. While framed within the narrative of the nation, motherhood and maternal bodies are revered in Indian culture. However, outside the bounds of marriage, the maternal body becomes a symbol of threat and disruption. Often seen either as a disease or a condition to be controlled, the discourse surrounding the maternal body has long been an area of discussion and debate. In *Shalimar the Clown,* Boonyi's motherhood and her maternal body are seen as monstrous, hideous and disgusting. Her body becomes a constant reminder of the loss of Kashmiriyat. It is her return to the village of Pachigam that further complicates her identity. As a fallen woman who has been declared dead by the community, she occupies a liminal space between the living and the non-living. This paper makes an attempt to understand how Rushdie's representation of Boonyi's maternal body, read through the lens of the uncanny, further contributes to exploring violence and resistance in the narrative. It goes beyond the representation of the female body as a site for constructing national allegory. The paper argues that Boonyi's concealed pregnancy, her monstrous transformation, and the final return to Pachigam as a socially dead figure unsettle the boundaries between self and other, belonging and exclusion, and victimhood and agency.
Keywords: Body, Maternal, Resistance, Uncanny, Violence.

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Introduction:

The maternal body occupies a crucial place in literature as well as culture, often challenging the idea of subjectivity. As a constantly expanding, leaking and divisible subject, the maternal body has the potential to disrupt the idea of self and the other. It is through the maternal body and the process of pregnancy that an individual is born and enters society. Therefore, located within the liminal space between biology and culture, the maternal body borders on being incredibly unstable. Clare Hanson writes, "seen as constitutively unstable, the maternal body provokes mingled fear and fascination. It defies dominant forms of representation, as though it contained a residue of experience that resisted cultural assimilation" (87). Hanson highlights the evolution of the idea of the maternal body and its literary representations throughout various centuries. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, maternity was seen as a threat to women's nervous systems, and it was considered to be a hindrance to their capacity for rational thinking. In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the maternal instability came to be situated as an "abject" that has the subversive potential to dismantle and disrupt the solid border between the symbolic and the imaginary.

Such an anxious construction of the notion of motherhood and the maternal body can be traced far back to Western mythology. Marilyn Francus notes in her essay "The Monstrous Mother" that in the Christian tradition "the female body as the site of reproduction is the sign of sin, for reproduction evokes, if not reenacts, the initial fall from grace" (829). In Homer's Odyssey, Scylla is seen as "an emblem of lust" and as a "fecund female and her yelping, parasitic progeny evokes the seemingly uncontrollable nature of femininity, and not surprisingly, the image functions as a locus of male disgust with, and fear of, sexuality and reproduction" (Francus 828). However, beyond such religious approaches there exists a real cultural anxiety regarding the maternal body because it represents "authority that women derive from their reproductive capacity", which is

sought to be contained by demonizing the maternal body (Francus 829). The maternal body is often associated with hysteria, a "term referred to the displacement or 'wandering' of the womb, which was thought to fragment the female body and divide it against itself" (Hanson 91). Such representations of the maternal bodies allowed society to control and dominate women's reproductive functions. Evidently, pregnancy, which has long been located ambivalently between health and disease, has the potential to evoke a peculiar form of fear. This study attempts to examine how Rushdie utilises the discourse surrounding the maternal body in his novel *Shalimar the Clown* (2005). Rushdie brings out a national allegory by portraying the maternal body as a site of violence. However, the narrative also presents the monstrous nonconformity of the maternal body. This paper analyses how Rushdie's depiction of Boonyi's maternal body evokes an idea of the uncanny and thereby destabilises the notion of violence and resistance. Existing scholarship on the novel has examined various aspects of the narrative, including the questions of national identity, postcolonial violence, gender, bodily representation, and the politics of home. Roxana-Elisabeta Marinescu's "Forging National Identity: Salman Rushdie and (Post)colonial Violence" examines Boonyi's body as an allegorical representation of the "mother country," connecting the destruction and violence of the body to the violence inflicted upon Kashmir. Peter Morey's "Mourning Becomes Kashmira: Islam, Melancholia, and the Evacuation of Politics in Salman Rushdie's *Shalimar the Clown*" similarly connects Boonyi's personal loss and relationship with Shalimar to the wider political violence and melancholia surrounding Kashmir. Julie Hakim Azzam's *The Alien Within: Postcolonial Gothic and the Politics of Home* (2007) offers a significant framework for reading the novel through the Gothic transformation of home into an unhomely and threatening space. Julie Hakim Azzam's doctoral dissertation, *The Alien Within: Postcolonial Gothic and the Politics of Home,* also identifies Boonyi's body as a site where desire,

sectarian conflict, and the loss of an idealised homeland intersect. These readings establish the important relationship between Boonyi's body, Kashmir, violence, and the collapse of the idea of "home." Therefore, Boonyi cannot be understood simply as a passive victim, as her body is simultaneously a site of desire, violence, transformation, and agency. Although Boonyi's pregnancy and bodily resistance have received critical attention, the uncanny significance of her maternal body has not been sufficiently theorised. Therefore, this paper argues that the uncanny maternal embodiment in the narrative destabilises the boundaries between self and other, familiar and unfamiliar, victim and agent, and life and death. The paper argues that Boonyi's concealed pregnancy and her later return to Pachigam not only reproduce the narrative of a violated homeland, but also expose the instability of the categories through which the community regulates female sexuality and determines belonging.

The Uncanny Maternal Body:

The term "uncanny" has increasingly become one of the most widely used and analysed concepts in contemporary discussions and debates across various disciplines, including philosophy, psychoanalysis, film studies, and literature. Sigmund Freud's 1919 essay "Das Unheimlich" attempted to build on Ernst Jentsch's 1906 essay "On the Psychology of the Uncanny" and define a distinct nature of the uncanny not as something strange, but as something strangely familiar. Nicholas Royle, in his book-length study of the uncanny, points out a number of ways in which the uncanny can be understood. By calling the uncanny "a peculiar comingling of familiar and unfamiliar", Royle writes,

> It can take the form of something familiar unexpectedly arising in a strange and unfamiliar context or of something strange and unfamiliar unexpectedly arising in

> a familiar context. It can consist in a homeliness uprooted, the revelation of something unhomely at the heart of hearth and home. (1)

While further analysing the uncanny, Freud invariably goes back to the notion of "home" and links the womb with the first home from which an individual is cruelly evicted. This uprootedness later creates an uncanny feeling when one encounters the female genitalia (Freud 151). Offering her views on Freud's understanding of the womb, French philosopher Sarah Kofman writes in "The Enigma of Woman" (*L'enigme de la Femme*),

> Indeed, the horror inspired by women's genital organs, those of the mother, is linked precisely to the perception of an incomplete sexuality, the observation of the lack of a penis. . . though 'The Uncanny' is slightly ambiguous in that it attributes the uncanny to the return of the repressed, to the reappearance of what was once Heimlich, of that place where everyone began, dwelling in complete peace and *Heimlichkeit*: it often happens that neurotic men declare that they feel there is something uncanny about the female genital organs. The unheimlich place, however, is the entrance to the former *Heim* [home] of all human beings, to the place where each of us lived once upon a time and in the beginning . . . the prefix '*un*' is the token of repression. (Kofman 82).

Therefore, anything that brings in the memory of the womb has the potential to become uncanny. This repressed longing to return to the womb is central to Freud's understanding of the uncanny or the unhomely. The idea of home, therefore, has a crucial connection with the female body and the multiple meanings it produces. In the novel *Shalimar the Clown*, Boonyi's maternal body becomes a source of the uncanny as it consistently contests the idea of home and the homely. It is

through her uncanny maternal body that Rushdie facilitates an understanding of the fear that is associated with the impossibility of going back home.

Kashmiriyat, Home, and the Monstrous Maternal Body

Initially, Kashmir, in which the novel is set, is portrayed as a safe haven –a paradise full of harmony and happiness, a womb-like space. And Boonyi Kaul, the daughter of the priest, is presented as a symbol of this heavenly beauty and pristine landscape of Kashmir. Born as "Bhoomi", meaning "the earth", Boonyi becomes an allegorical representation of the land of Kashmir and its notion of Kashmiriyat that reflects "the belief that at the heart of Kashmiri culture there was a common bond that transcended all other differences" (Rushdie 110). For her lover, Shalimar the Clown, Boonyi "was the earth and the earth was the subject and he had grabbed it and sought to bend its destiny to his will" (Rushdie 47). After their first physical encounter, however, Shalimar is shocked to discover that "the loss of her virginity had unleashed something reckless in Boonyi" and "a wild defiant uncaringness" exhibited by her puts him in confusion (Rushdie 93). This overt portrayal of her untamable sexuality is contrasted with the Hindu ideal of femininity represented by Sita (Rushdie 50). Boonyi challenges the conventional notion of female sexuality as passive throughout the novel. However, her uncontrollable sexuality is appropriated by the landscape in which it is situated. Although she crosses the line of modesty and religion with Shalimar the clown, it is not seen as a threat by their society. Their innocent love story is set against the backdrop of an equally innocent social reality of Kashmir, where religious identities did not create any divisions. Hindu and Muslim were mere descriptions of identity, and "the frontiers between the words, their hard edges, had grown smudged and blurred" (Rushdie 57). It is religious harmony, and mutual love and respect for each other that finally culminate into the wedding of

Shalimar and Boonyi, reinforcing the bond and beauty of Kashmiriyat. This emphasis on Kashmiriyat as a force of assimilation and amalgamation indicates a desperate longing to preserve "home". Boonyi and Shalimar's marriage is an allegorical representation of Kashmir's unique socio-cultural identity in between two contesting religious forces (Hinduism and Islam). Boonyi's sexual recklessness is appropriated within this narrative of Kashmiriyat as she is still a representation of "home". In *Shalimar the Clown*, Boonyi's first transgression is permitted as her body remains within the discourse of Kashmiriyat, a pure form of harmony, that is increasingly threatened by the external world of growing religious fundamentalism. Rushdie's novel often employs this narrative strategy where the women's bodies become an allegorical representation of the nation and a space where national politics is played out. This construction of the female body as home can be traced back to the nationalist literature of the 19th century, such as Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's *Anandamath* (1882). In her essay, "Woman, Nation, and Narration in *Midnight's Children*", Nalini Natarajan points out, " 'Mother India' is an enormously powerful cultural signifier gaining strength not only from atavistic memories from the Hindu epics, Sita, Sati, Savitri, Draupadi, but also its use in moments of national (typically conflated with Hindu) cultural resurgence" (84). The symbol of India as mother is evident in the wide cultural discourse where the land is revered as "Bharat Mata". It was during the nationalist movements that the sanctity of the Indian nation easily became synonymous with the sanctity and purity of the women. In "The Nation and its Women" (1993), Partha Chatterjee observes,

> The world is the external, the domain of the material; the home represents one's inner spiritual self, one's true identity. The world is a treacherous terrain of the pursuit of material interests, where practical considerations reign supreme. It is also typically the domain of the male. The home in its essence must remain unaffected

> by the profane activities of the material world — and woman [is] its representation. (120)

It is because of the prevalence of such discourses that the female bodies, especially the maternal bodies and their representation acquired a central position in the postcolonial narratives. Natarajan describes the moment of Saleem Sinai/India's birth as a time when "the midnight of Indian independence is represented through refraction of the colors of the Indian flag on to nation celebrations ... and the bodies of women giving birth" (76). One of the most intriguing aspects of the representation of the maternal body in literature is the existence of a wide variety of perspectives on this phenomenon. While female authors have examined the maternal body as a site where identity is compromised by the division of the body and the pressures associated with the maternal role, male authors, by contrast, regard pregnancy as a disruptive event that may threaten the stability of family ties, and they consider illegitimacy as a threat to the social order (Hanson 96). Hanson points out that more often than not the male writers deploy the maternal body in a philosophical allegorical fashion. For instance, in Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, Mrs. Shandy's body represents the contemporary philosophical tenets; in James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922), a parallel is evoked between human gestation and the growth of the English language; and in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1980), Padma's labouring body becomes a symbol of the sufferings of 'Mother India' during Partition (97).

However, later in the narrative, Boonyi's maternal body becomes a symbol of something sinister in *Shalimar the Clown*. As long as she is married to Shalimar, her body remains a symbol of "home", and a familiar space where the ideals of the valley are preserved. However, as soon as she seduces the American ambassador and begins her sexual relationship with him, she becomes a threat –representation of an uncanny fear that the home is "not home". As Julie Hakim Azzam

points out in her dissertation, Boonyi's maternal body "is no celebration or nostalgic image of untainted beauty, but instead the monstrous accumulation of the excesses of desire, racial and sectarian contamination, and a long fall from grace" (185). Her maternal body evokes a peculiar horror as it is linked with a perverse illegitimacy. She breaks the bond of marriage with her husband Shalimar and runs away with the American ambassador Max Ophuls destabilising the purity of the notion of Kashmiriyat. It is not exactly her sexual relationship with Max that threatens the people, rather, it is her violation of the purity of Kashmiriyat. Boonyi's sexual encounter with Shalimar before their marriage is contained within the narrative of Kashmiriyat, and even when they are caught in their "rash and licentious" behaviour, the sarpanch Abdullah Noman states, "there is no Hindu Muslim issue. Two kashmiri – two Pachigami –youngsters wish to marry, that's all" (Rushdie 110). Kashmir represents an idealised place where the natural beauty as well as co-existing multiculturalism is valued above everything else. Boonyi and Shalimar's love symbolised that unbreakable bond among the Kashmiri people that defined their idea of "home". Defending their love was considered as a defense of all that's finest among themselves (Rushdie 110). However, Boonyi breaks away from that bond when Max Ophuls, a symbol of the external world, arrives in the scene. The allegory of the nation that Rushdie builds up in the narrative becomes unstable from this point onwards as Max Ophuls is seen both as India and America, and Shalimar and Boonyi both become symbols of Kashmir.

A few months after the beginning of their relationship, she starts talking about her lost lover and the lost land in encoded languages. She makes her personal longing for home political when she starts talking about Shalimar as "Kashmir" (Rushdie 196). In their private conversations, Boonyi decides that the term "Indian armed forces" would secretly refer to the ambassador himself, she would use the Indian presence in the valley as a surrogate for the American occupation of her

body" (Rushdie 197). It is interesting to note that in Boonyi's descriptions, whenever she talks about the beauty of Kashmir, she is indeed talking about her husband Shalimar. However, as soon as she starts describing the "raping and pillaging", she is identifying her own body with that land. It is her home that has suddenly turned into an unfamiliar ugliness due to the foreign occupation. Boonyi's body and her home become synonymous in her narrative as she starts voicing her frustrations. Gradually, when she realises the corruption that has occurred in her body and the inevitable failure of her aspirations, Boonyi too starts acquiring a sense of ugliness. The desire to go back to her husband and her home starts manifesting in her acts of defiance. After miserably realising the futility of her dreams Boonyi starts consuming excessive food. Rushdie makes the familiar female body an unfamiliar sight while he describes Boonyi's monstrous appetite.

> She took to gluttony with the same bottomless enthusiasm she had once for sex, diverting the immense force of her erotic requirements from her bed to her table. . . . Her appetite had grown to subcontinental in size. It crossed all frontiers of language and custom. She was vegetarian and nonvegetarian, fish- and meat-eating, Hindu, Christian, and Muslim, a democratic, secularist omnivore. (201-202)

Julie Hakim Azzam writes that Boonyi's increasing appetite symbolizes a displacement of her sexual desires onto culinary ones stating that, "Her 'subcontinental' appetite for pan-Indian food causes her body to expand its borders in order to take in each and every region of India's vast culinary palate" (183). According to Azzam, this shifts the image of Boonyi's body as "victimized Kashmir" to "a monstrous image of 'mother India' who allegorically gives birth to Kashmir (a)" (183).

To compensate for the loss of her expanding dreams, she starts expanding her body (Rushdie 201). Her beautiful body starts deteriorating: "her hair lost its lustre, her skin coarsened,

her teeth rotted, her body odour soared, and her bulk –ah! Her bulk – increased steadily, week by week, day by day, almost hour by hour" (Rushdie 203). This grotesque, monstrous body, ever expanding in its size, represents the corporeal violence experienced by Boonyi. It also brings in the notion of the fall of paradise as Kashmir also starts losing its beauty as terrorism and religious fundamentalism creep inside its landscape. However, running away from her home was Boonyi's own choice, and her gradual consumption of food and pills is also her own decision. Boonyi's transgression cannot therefore be considered as a dramatic representation of Kashmir's destruction. It is at this juncture that the national allegory gives way to an uncanny non-conformity in the narrative. Her monstrous body can no longer fit inside the familiar boundaries of the national allegory. She defies the familiar narratives of femininity. Unlike Sita, she is not abducted by a demon king, and Shalimar has not come for her rescue as did Ram. In this story, Boonyi is not always a passive recipient of violence and exploitation. Although she suffers exploitation and experiences abandonment, her action of leaving Shalimar causes a painful feeling in him and ends their marital relationship that symbolised the larger notion of Kashmiriyat. Therefore, Boonyi's transgression is an uncanny double of the familiar national allegory and therefore calls for a different reading altogether. Similar to Boonyi's body, the entire Kashmiri landscape is haunted by the feeling of unfamiliarity that has appeared in their homeland. The occupation of the Indian Armed forces, the constant presence of Western influences and a sinister development of terrorism have turned this womb-like space into an uncanny one. Boonyi's maternal body represents this brutal transition, this repression and violence that have become a part of Kashmiri politics. However, as soon as she reveals her secret pregnancy, she subverts this idea of violence into a form of resistance. When Max tries to discard her company due to her declining beauty, she evaluates her position and uses her pregnancy as a weapon of defiance. Her pregnancy becomes a

means through which she seeks to renegotiate the terms of her arrangement with Max and assert control over her own body. By not taking the contraceptive pills that she was asked to take every day, she thwarts their dominance over her body. By not conforming to the rules of the arrangement between herself and Max Ophuls, Boonyi categorically destabilises the balance of power. The ever-expanding maternal body becomes an uncanny source of dread for Max Ophuls as the narrative states, "the sight of her ballooning, cetacean body still had the power to shock him. What lay within it, what was growing daily in her womb, was even more of a shock" (Rushdie 204). The fact that she was able to hide her pregnancy until "it was too late to think about an abortion" makes her maternal body even more sinister. Her pregnant body becomes uncanny as it carried within itself a secret, a truth that was never supposed to come out. The monstrosity with which her fat body came to be seen by the others suddenly evokes a sense of horror as it is revealed that "the pregnancy had been invisible. It lay hidden somewhere inside her fat" (Rushdie 204). Boonyi's accusations ring true as she calls Max the creator of her monstrosity,

> Look at me, she was saying. 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 never spoke of love, she was saying. I was honest and you have turned me into your lie. This is not me. This is not me. This is you. (Rushdie 205)

Similar to the body of Frankenstein's monster, Boonyi's body is also a terrible sight to look at. Her maternal body is portrayed as something that can evoke fear and disgust at the same time. Azzam notes that "the invisibility of Boonyi's pregnancy emphasises that this form of monstrosity is linked closely to fecundity and the female body, which is the object of uncanny dread in both

Shalimar and *Frankenstein"* (185). Just as Frankenstein's monster was a product of neglect and parental abandonment, Boonyi's monstrosity also stems from Max's neglect and lack of care.

The Unhomely Return: Boonyi as a Living Dead

Boonyi's body assumes a different form of monstrosity when she is denied entry into the society of Pachigam when she returns home after giving up her daughter, Kashmira. Her return is depicted as the return of the dead –an unwelcome spectre who is feared by all. Her presence is seen as a haunting reminder of the fall of paradise and the loss of Kashmiriyat. She is literally considered a *mritak* as Zoon Misri describes,

> They killed you after what you did. They said you were dead to them and they announced your death and they made us all swear an oath. They went to the authorities and filled out a form and got it signed and stamped and so you are dead and you cannot return. You have been mourned properly for forty days with all correct religious and social observances and so of course you cannot just pop up again. You are a dead person. Your life has been ended. It's official. (Rushdie 223)

Her return as a "mritak" is indicative of the uncanniness of her maternal body that is both literally and figuratively seen as a site of haunting. She is alienated and discarded by the village as a corpse that has no right to exist among the living. By giving up her illegitimate daughter, Boonyi wanted to acquire a place in her old home. However, her pregnancy and the birth of Kashmira have already transformed her body into a reminder of her relationship with Max Ophuls and her departure from the marital and communal order. Therefore, her act of giving up her daughter, does not automatically restore her social identity. She is continuously perceived through the transgression that has supposedly rendered her unfit to belong. Boonyi's return also transforms the

meaning of home and reveals the complicated gender norms. Pachigam once represented a secure world grounded in the ideals of Kashmiriyat, where Hindu and Muslim identities coexisted within a shared cultural community. However, Boonyi's inability to belong to that society after her transgression reveals that this harmony depends upon the regulation of gender and sexuality. The home that she longs to recover is therefore not simply lost through political violence or geographical displacement. Instead, it has become unhomely because its promise of belonging is conditional. Gina Wisker observes this preoccupation with liminal spaces in postcolonial Gothic literature in "Crossing Liminal Spaces: Teaching the Postcolonial Gothic",

> Images of liminal spaces are common to the Gothic. They tend to be doorsteps or windows through which you do or do not invite in the ghost or vampire; windows against which ghosts scratch (as in Wuthering Heights); and the liminal spaces of existence, hovering between being and unbeing, dead and undead. These liminal spaces and the interruptions in calm, often threatened complacency, in authorized views or orthodoxies, are figured as interstices: underneath, above, around the side of, parallel to, or in the fissures in established places and being. (412)

Although, *Shalimar the Clown* cannot be considered as a conventional Gothic novel, Boonyi's characterisation captures the Gothic motifs of haunting, the unhomely, and the boundary between life and death. Boonyi occupies a space between self and other, living and dead. Her liminality challenges the notion of Kashmiriyat as a discourse of coexistence and reveals its exclusionary practices through which that discourse is maintained. Her exclusion as a *mritak* demonstrates the community's power to deny her social identity, but her reappearance also disrupts the finality of the death imposed upon her. Boonyi cannot recover her former place, but the community also fails to make her completely disappear. In this sense, her return constitutes a limited and ambivalent

form of resistance. Her physical presence unsettles the symbolic order that has attempted to erase her, and yet, it does not free her from suffering. However, it exposes the inability of communal authority to make its categories of purity, belonging, and exclusion entirely secure.

Conclusion

Boonyi's pregnancy in the novel is not limited to the representation of the nation or an episode of victimisation. It becomes a material form through which she both experiences and resists violence. Her later return to Pachigam as a *mritak* intensifies this uncanniness, as she is biologically alive but socially declared dead. Boonyi's return as a *mritak* also extends the novel's representation of violence beyond the individual body to the social production of identity and death. Her maternal body becomes uncanny because it embodies what the community seeks to exclude but cannot eliminate. Through her liminal existence between life and death, home and exile, and victimhood and agency, Rushdie unsettles the national allegory in which Boonyi's body might otherwise be reduced to a passive symbol of Kashmir's suffering. The impossibility of Boonyi's homecoming thus exposes the failure of both social belonging and national nostalgia. The article proposes that the uncanny maternal body provides a way of understanding how Rushdie connects bodily violence, political violence, and female resistance while simultaneously exposing the instability of home, identity, and belonging.

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