Representation of History in Salman Rushdie’s Shame

The fictionalisation of postcolonial history through the viewpoint of the writers also takes out a changed attitude. Instead of presenting historical truth from a single point of view of the governing awareness of the author, the postcolonial writers tend to provide multiple perspectives. Another aspect of the postcolonial perspective is the interaction between the colonisers and the colonised views. The intervention of politics in universal human experience also finds expression in postcolonial writings. In the process, what gains significance in relation to historical events is not the truth but truths. The postcolonial writer conveys multiple voices which are more significant and very often overlooked in the colonised text. More than the representation of an individual’s life, the postcolonial writers give importance to pluralistic truth.

Rushdie’s Shame, published in 1983, reveals the trauma of migration which he has been facing throughout his life. The concept of identity as a result of their attachment to the homeland makes the migrants nostalgic with their roots. He furnishes the assessment of socio-political life in Pakistan. The life-blood of politics is depicted through the elements like race, religion and nationhood. Rushdie observes the universe of originalities - particularly characters, places and important events related to partition and decolonization. He predicts the characters of Shame as symbolic representations of Pakistan. Each and every character in the novel is illustrated in some way or the other emblematically considering the political history of Pakistan.

The novel deals with the representation and interpretation of History and Politics. It cope with a series of military coups, assassinations, and political corruption, and the novel is very much deep rooted in the ruin of the country. On the other hand, some characters clearly allude to some real historical figures. Iskander Harappa is probably an allegory to Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and Raza Hyder to General Zia ul Haq. Harappa’s government is corrupted like that of Bhutto’s and Harappa is overthrown by Raza Hyder and is hanged. Raza Hyder is an army general and he turns Peccavistan into a fundamentalist country, with the public stoning him to death.

Rushdie traces and examines the political history of Pakistan by means of the political life of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. The family saga is centered on the rivalry between Pakistani political leaders Zulfikar Ali Bhutto represented by Iskander Harappa and his predecessor, General Muhammad Zia ul Haq represented by Raza Hyder. The novel speaks about the “Question about the execution of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. But only half the question got past my lips” (27). History plays a double role in Shame. Rushdie in the novel analyses the political leaders. Bhutto represents the modern ideals of democracy and socialism. The General executes Bhutto, after overthrowing his leadership. He also establishes a more centrally controlled government than the Islamization of
Pakistan. Bhutto has been considered to be the most progressive and powerful leader getting into power in Pakistan after the Civil War. A military regime led by Mohammed Zia ul Haq overthrows Bhutto. Zulfikar Ali Bhutto is imprisoned and hanged with the utmost secrecy later, causing great remonstration and anxiety in Pakistan political scenario.

The two political leaders represent the clash between intellectual modernism and the adherence to ideological convictions. The novel deals with the rise and fall of Bhutto and his relationship with foreign ambassadors. Zia ul Haq hangs him and Benazir represented by Sufiya Zinobia wreaks her vengeance. By these incidents, Rushdie brings out the power-hungry nature of the politicians in Pakistan. Using the power to suppress their enemy is also an aspect of colonisation.

According to Rushdie, Omar Khayyam is not oppressed by a dual consciousness between India and Pakistan. He takes the role of chronicler, a reviver of history. Omar Khayyam becomes a secondary character as the plot changes between the rise and fall of two men and their families. Iskander Harappa and Raza Hyder are the characters based on the past events connected with Pakistan’s Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and General Mohammed Zia ul Haq respectively.

Rushdie reclaims the history of Pakistan by various family events. The prisms of a family event are dramas involving a military dictator and his mentally retarded, ultimately murderous daughter. Rushdie is concerned with the ailing Pakistan and its repercussions. He says “If this were a realistic novel about Pakistan, on my good days, I feel very fond of the place” (68). At this point, the story takes place in Peccavistan, a fictional country, which in many ways resemble Pakistan.

The history of the region that is now called Pakistan is singularly complex. However, an overview of the history of the region is essential to understand the context of Shame as a political novel, and a work of postcolonial literature. Judy Newman in The Ballistic Bard-Postcolonial Fiction, describes postcolonial writing as an “argument with history” (192). This section, therefore, provides the context of the official view of history that Rushdie, as a postcolonial writer, is arguing against. Isobel Shaw in his Odyssey Illustrated Guide to Pakistan, has interpreted the key stages of Pakistan’s history as follows:

The story of Pakistan divides into six distinct periods: prehistory; the ancient empires, from about 3000 BC to the sixth century AD; the coming of Islam, from 711 to the late 14th century; the Mughal period, from 1526 to the 18th century; the British period, from the mid-18th century to 1947; and Pakistan since Partition and Independence. (64)

However, this is a simplified overview of the region’s history as the name “Pakistan” was not used until 1933, less than fifteen years before the country’s creation. Rushdie concentrates on the recent history of the region, because it is in the last sixty or seventy years that Pakistan’s identity as a Muslim state has been shaped from ideal to reality, and it is this shaping of a national consciousness that is central to Shame.

In the novel Shame, Pakistan is the country of shame, which is filled with coups, massacres, rigged elections, religious hypocrisy, and power-hungry, treacherous, mean-minded men who have violated the ideals that lead to the formation of a state meant to embody the purity of faith. In Shame, the symbol of shame is a symbol of postcolonial politics. It symbolises the collective responsibility of the people of Pakistan for allowing inhuman things to happen.

Pakistan is relatively a new country, built from two separate land masses of what had been India, separated by hundreds of miles of Indian land. Thames, in his book India and Pakistan in the Twentieth Century states, “In 1947 the British announced that they planned to establish two successor states to their rule - India and Pakistan” (45). For many long years, there had been an escalating tide of feeling in Indian society, not only towards the end of British rule, but also towards the creation of a separate and independent state for Indian Muslims. The Muslim League was formed in 1906 and the idea of the creation of separate state called Pakistan for Indian Muslims gained political momentum.
The Muslim League was founded in order to provide a voice for the Muslim people of India who mostly lived in the northeastern and northwestern states. In this regard, critic Thames states that the people in the Indian regions “should have complete control of their internal affairs within a loose Indian Federation” (41). The idea of political autonomy for the Muslim northern states was proposed in 1930 by Sir Mohammad Iqbal, the President of the Muslim League, who believed that these regions were to be controlled within the Indian Federation.

Up to this point of time there has been no political pressure to form a separate Muslim state. The League still thinks in terms of promoting the reforms necessary to create a less rigid Indian Federation. However, this political direction soon changed. Critic Thames has emphasised the notion of a completely separate Muslim homeland which has been gaining momentum in the region’s psyche, and in 1933, the name “Pakistan” was coined by Chaudhuri Rahmat Ali, “meaning in Urdu ‘Land of the Pure’, and made from the initial letters of the Muslim-dominated regions of the Punjab, the Afghan frontier, Kashmir and Sind plus the Persian ‘Stan’ meaning ‘country’” (41). Pakistan had therefore been defined geographically, and the bringing about of this state had consolidated into an achievable objective.

One problem that the Muslim League faced at this time was opposition from the Indian National Congress, which refused to accept that the Muslim League was a representative of the majority of Muslims in India. The Indian National Congress was inaugurated on 28th December 1885, with the blessings of the British Government, in order to aid communication among many ethnic groups within Indian society, and therefore it was made more stable politically. It should be remembered that only half of India was directly under the British rule, while the others remained under the jurisdiction of over six hundred regional princesses.

The Indian National Congress was based in Bombay, and was filled in by the educated Indian middle classes in which the majority were professional people such as lawyers and teachers who had considerable political influence. Partition refers to the historical division of the Indian subcontinent into India and Pakistan. The partition of India and Pakistan happened at midnight on 15th August 1947. After the partition, Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims migrated from their homeland to live with the people of the same religion. Partition has ended the life of millions of refugees. Only a handful of people remained after it.

Pakistan was born, but the country’s birth was heavily eclipsed by violence. The process of partition meant that millions of people were forced to flee from their homes and cross the border into their new homeland, and the tension that mounted inevitably led to hostility. Rushdie feels sympathetic towards the refugees of partition. Critic Isobel Shaw, in his Odyssey Illustrated Guide to Pakistan describes:

The most explosive problem area was the fertile Punjab, where Hindu, Muslim and Sikh populations were inextricably mixed. At independence, an estimated six million Muslim refugees, mainly from Punjab, streamed across the border into Pakistan, while some four and half a million Sikhs and Hindus went the other way (into India). This migration was accompanied by some of the most grisly communal violence of modern times; resulting in the loss of perhaps half a million lives. (73)

Shame depicts not only the physical violence during emergence of Pakistan, but also focuses on the central psychological byproduct of this violence—the guilt, both personal and collective, that arises from harming others. Malcolm Bradbury, a well-known novelist and columnist for the London Guardian newspaper describes Rushdie’s novel Shame as being concerned with “Shame and Shamelessness, born from violence which is modern history” (43). It is difficult to understand Shame, without understanding the context of Pakistan’s origins.

The ongoing process of partition in the shape of the mass migration between India and Pakistan left a legacy of bitterness on both sides. Williams and Crowther, in Spectrum Guide to Pakistan, describe that, “This exodus constituted the largest migration of mankind in the history of the world” (64). It is therefore not surprising that the violence between India and Pakistan has
escalated again. It is the fate of the Himalayan kingdom of Kashmir, which has brought the crisis to a climax, and this subject is important to Rushdie’s own history.

The ruler of Kashmir, Hari Singh, a Hindu, had then refused to give up his province to either Pakistan or India as a part of the Partition process. The population of Kashmir had predominantly Muslims, roughly eighty percent, and therefore, Pakistan had given its support to the Pakistani hill-people in their invasion of Kashmir. India had promised to render its support to the region’s Sikh leader, on the understanding that Kashmir shall join India. The resulting fight lasted until 1949.

The violence in Pakistan’s early years has echoed in the political situation of the country. Within five years of the nation’s birth, its first two Prime Ministers have been assassinated. Muhammad Ali Jinnah, hailed as the “Father of the Nation” was killed thirteen months after taking over his office. His successor and friend, Laiquat Ali Khan was killed three years later. After that there was no suitable successor to take over the leadership of government. This left Pakistan in an extremely vulnerable condition just at the time when it most needed strong leadership. As a result, Pakistan’s constitution was not drafted until 1956. It was highly ironical that soon afterwards; the constitution was torn up by General Ayub Khan, who seized power in a military coup. He then set up a law military government and the country was controlled by the army for many years.

These two characters, Zulfiquar Ali and Raza Hyder can also be referred to as the Pakistani leaders in general, because it seems that in Pakistan there is always a leader, usually a famous general who is related to one of the previous leaders. This leader becomes badly corrupt after a while, and is overthrown by another leader in a bloody coup. Rushdie interprets Zulfiquar Ali and Raza Hyder’s deeds and tries to find motives for their actions. For example, he explains how Raza Hyder, who is mostly a likeable character, a loving husband and a father who does not show any inclination towards extremism, turned the country into a fundamentalist state during his premiership.

Rushdie has noted in the novel: “Army is watching these days, Gichki Sahib. All over the country the eyes of honest soldiers see, and if they look away from politicians, where will they turn for purity?” (102). Politicians’ impurities are discussed from the military point of view. Rushdie’s views on moral chaos are described in the novel as the scandal between Maulana Dawood and Bilquis. “Sindbad Mengal left his office at Mengal Mahal. He did not stop whistling until the knife entered his guts” (102). Sindbad Mengal who knows the scandal of Maulana Dawood and Bilquis was murdered with a knife by the politicians. The narrator’s exposition of the crimes committed in the name of the nation is undertaken via partially reconstructing the regimes of Zia ul Haq and Zulfikar Ali Bhutto in the country.

Rushdie vividly exposes the repercussions of violence in post-independence Pakistan. Rushdie, in the collection of essays “Step Across This Line: Collected Non-fiction,” avers that Pakistan is a place in which democratic institutions, indeed democratic instincts have never been allowed to germinate. And he adds, “Instead, the country’s elites - military, political, industrial, aristocratic, feudal - take it in turns to loot the nation’s wealth” (285). In this regard, the novel Shame consolidates Rushdie’s position as a dissenting, anti-establishment writer.

Rushdie focuses on the tyrannical and the repressive nature of the regimes of the Pakistani elite, where democracy has no place and violence reigns. As an act of remonstration against the autocratic establishment of a postcolonial nation, Shame is a significant postcolonial text. Cynthia Carey Abrioux says in the article “In the Name of the Nation: Salman Rushdie’s Shame,” “The predominant discourse of Shame is that of an incendiary and denunciatory evocation of a postcolonial nation in a state of moral chaos and murderous repression” (48). This ruins the country and there is no way to escape from the violence.

As a matter of fact, Pakistan would deny its Indian past. The new nation has no authoritative past of its own and has to grapple with a complex identity crisis. The seeds of discord are consequently inherent. Cynthia Carey Abrioux in the same essay argues that this lack of stability
rendered the nation an easy target for exploitation by ruthless power brokers who were able to “consecutively re-inscribe and recuperate the space” (50). The misuse of power ends with the destruction of the nation.

Talvar ul Haq, the son-in-law of Raza Hyder helps in the political expediency of Raza Hyder. By a curious and disastrous turn of events, Iskander Harappa’s political eclipse is on the basis of a proven charge of assassination of Little Mir Harappa. Talvar ul Haq, a trusted follower of Harappa, becomes a witness to the assassination. He hands Raza Hyder his secret details record on the Mir Harappa killing, from which it is obvious that Haroun Harappa has committed the murder, out of his deep rooted hatred for his father.

The introduction of the duellists, Raza Hyder and Iskander Harappa, leads into a world of contrasting parallels. The political happenings among the duellists are canvassed. Raza Hyder’s rise in politics has preceded that of Iskander Harappa. Raza Hyder is the hero and warrior of the first war in 1948. He is the man of Aanso. The phenomenal rise of Raza Hyder and Iskander Harappa become the political history of an anonymous country. The entrance of little Mir Harappa, cousin of Harappa into this political and domestic world, provides an essential dimension. The narrator’s exposition of the crimes committed in the name of the nation is undertaken partially by reconstructing the regimes of Zia ul Haq and Zulfiquar Ali Bhutto.

Historical facts are imbibed into the text. General Raza Hyder, who ultimately becomes president-dictator of his country, is a commentary on General Mohammed Zia ul-Haq. The character of the rich landlord and playboy, Iskander Harappa is a caricature of Zulfiquar Ali Bhutto. He enjoys a successful reign as Prime Minister until he is overthrown by Raza Hyder and eventually executed after a mock trial for the murder of a relative. The narrative focuses on the careers, contentions and corruption of these two rivals in the political arena.

The historical perspective of Shame provides complex history of the region, which includes the political history of both past and present. The novel provides an insight into the social and historical evolution of Pakistan from the point of view of the characters by their reactions to social pressures and the way they see their position in the creation of their country. Rushdie engages himself in history. He also traces the history of Pakistan, records a chain of betrayals and wars, which have their roots in the medieval time frame. Centuries of slavery and oppression have frozen the spirit in action. “Death and disease, knavery and debauchery make the only events of their history” (76). So the total suffering of the Pakistanis after the independence has been revealed through various incidents.