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☞ Research Article



Revisiting the Elements of Postmodernism in Salman Rushdie's *Shame*

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Abstract

Postmodern literature is thought to be typically anti-traditional and anti-foundationalist. It can be said that the major body of postmodern literature is thought to have started from the 1950s onwards. The major postmodern literary features are metafiction, self-reflexivity, intertextuality, writerly text, hybridity, magical realism, foreshadowing, irony, parody, anti-

novel, anti-hero, fabulation, surfiction, hyperreality, use of language games etc. The prominent themes in postmodern literature are such as crisis of identity, cultural hybridity, experiences of migrants and their feeling of alienation, the general feeling of rootlessness. Postmodern fiction also emphasizes the disbelief in God as well as the disbelief in the conventional notions of the unified or coherent individual. Salman Rushdie has been studied and researched as a postcolonial writer as there are obvious postcolonial themes in his novels. But we can also study him as a postmodern writer. The paper makes an attempt to discuss the postmodern literary concept of meaningless of life as prevalent in Rushdie's *Shame* and to put forth Rushdie as a postmodern writer.

Keywords: Postmodernism, Life, Hybridity, Surfiction, Fabulation, Culture, Postcolonialism, Anxiety, Identity crisis, Uncertainty

Introduction

Postmodernism is a late 20th century movement in philosophy and literary theory that generally questions the basic assumptions of western philosophy in the modern period. It is the most discussed and debated contemporary literary theory that follows modernism. Arnold Toynbee adopted the term 'postmodernism'. He described the age of postmodernism as one of anarchy and relativism. It is true that the term postmodernism is held to characterize a large number of the most influential or recent writers worldwide. There are many main themes in Rushdie's novel such as the mixture of history and fiction, fantasy and reality, use of myth and magical realism. It is an attempt to study the novel because while studying these novels, Rushdie's real potentiality as a postmodern writer is revealed. The major features of his novels are magical realism, unreliable narrator, metafiction, self-reflexivity, unconventional narrative technique, writerly text, mixture of various genres, foreshadowing, multiplicity of interpretations and most importantly the open endings of the texts which are the major literary features of postmodern literature.

Meaninglessness of Life in *Shame*

Meaninglessness in human life is a major theme depicted in postmodern literature. Rushdie's *Shame* has presented characters in the novel experiencing this feeling prominently. These characters always have a feeling that their lives have no meaning at all and it is not fruitful to live in future but these characters do not lament the meaninglessness in their lives; rather they celebrate it. This situation is explicitly portrayed as:

It is only fair to state, however, that the medical evidence in the case runs strongly against this version of events. Yakoob Balloch, who had been suffering for some time from sporadic pains in the region of the appendix, almost certainly died of natural causes, his death-throes caused not by the spectral poisons of the putatively murderous sisters, but by the genuinely fatal banality of peritonitis. Or some such thing. (17-18)

In the above paragraph, it is noticed that the death of Shakil's friends have taken place not because of diseases but their own behavioural temperament. This exposes the characters' distressed life that results in death. The characters in this novel feel that they are living a

meaningless life. The following lines emphasize this feeling of meaninglessness of life in the characters' lives.

Through an old telescope, from the upper-storey windows of the house, the child Omar Khayyam surveyed the emptiness of the landscape around Q, which convinced him that he must be near the very Rim of Things, and that beyond the Impossible Mountains on the horizon must lie the great nothing into which, in his nightmares, he had begun to tumble with monotonous regularity. (21- 22)

Here, the narrator reveals the emptiness in Shakil's life and emptiness in the city of Q as well. The cited paragraph also depicts a general feeling of monotony in characters' lives. It is further noticed that Shakil sisters try to convince Omar Khayyam Shakil about their heroic attempts and try to establish their identity but finally they fail as he understands that his mothers are pretending to be so. The narrator explains this situation in the following lines; "When they emerge from the rubble of their exploded identity, they make heroic attempts to pretend to Omar... place with considerable difficulty" (38).

It is noticed that though Shakil sisters try to show that they are heroic and will help their son, Shakil comes to know about their pretension and they fail to present themselves as useful to him. It is studied that the two girl housekeepers work for Iskander Harappa's mother. Iskander Harappa has to be away from his home many times and as a result Rani Harappa stays at home alone. According to these two girl servants at Rani Harappa's house, Rani avails all the facilities in her house but still she lives a meaningless life. The narrator of the novel describes Rani Harappa's meaningless life through the eyes of these servant girls; "Shit, but, Isky gives his wife good clothes, the best of everything, no mistake. That is true. But if a peacock dances in the jungle, there is nobody to see its tail" (94).

The girls cleverly portray meaninglessness in Rani Harappa's life. According to these servant girls, Rani might be beautiful and have all the facilities in the world but she does not have anyone who can praise her beauty and take care of her. Such kind of loneliness and resultant meaninglessness of human beings is the noticeable feature in postmodern literature. Postmodern fiction does not lament the sense of meaninglessness; rather it celebrates the meaninglessness of experience and life. There is one more incident which portrays Rani Harappa's life as meaningless. She herself thinks that she is no more important for anyone in her house and the society as well. The following paragraph rightly describes the situation.

'If I was murdered here, the news would never leave the estate.' Rani is uncertain whether or not she has spoken aloud. Her thoughts, loosened by solitude, often burst these days through her unconscious lips; and often contradict one another, because the very next notion to form in her mind as she sits on the heavy-eaved verandah is this: 'I love the house.' (94-95)

Rani Harappa herself thinks that no one cares for her and it would be no loss for anyone if she dies and the news of her death would not make people mourn for her absence. This is an applicable example of a character feeling meaningless life. According to the narrator of the novel, Shakil's three mothers live a meaningless life too. Meaninglessness in their lives has also been depicted through a boy character in the novel.

When Raza Hyder returned to Q, the boy was standing at the window of the great solitary house once again. One of the local guides, in answer to the Colonel's inquiry, told Raza that the house was owned by three-crazy sinful witches who never came outside but who managed to produce children nevertheless. The boy at the window was their second son: witch-fashion, they claimed to share their offspring. (101)

Through the above cited extract, the narrator, once again, portrays Shakil's three mothers' lives and experiences as meaningless. They are called witches and their house is called a solitary house. It is understood that Rani Harappa lives a meaningless life and Raza Hyder's wife, namely Bilquis is not exception to this. Bilquis also feels helpless and lives a meaningless life. It is described in the novel; "Bilquis has always wanted to be a queen, but now that Raza Hyder is at last a sort of prince the ambition has gone sour on her lips" (111).

Bilquis expects that she should live a life as a queen but her husband does not even treat her as his wife. Raza Hyder has an extra-marital affair with other ladies and Bilquis does not even receive his true love. This reveals her existence as meaningless and she does not have control on her own life. Thus, the helplessness of her character is undoubtedly noticed and this is the major postmodern theme pertinent in the present novel. The narrator, while writing about the former Chief Minister's life, clearly portrays the meaninglessness in his life.

This was the period shortly after the disappearance of the former Chief Minister Aladdin Gichki, who had finally been released from captivity for lack of hard evidence against him; he lived quietly with his wife and dog for several weeks until the day he went out to walk the Alsatian and never returned, even though his last words to Begum Gichki had been, 'Tell the cook to make a dozen extra meatballs for dinner, I'm starving to death today.' (118)

In the above paragraph, it is understood that Aladdin Gichki expected attention of others according to his position but he finally cannot manage to convince people to have respect in people's minds and is left to starving in his last days. It reveals meaninglessness of his life. The depiction of meaninglessness of characters' lives is also a major feature of postmodern fiction and it is extensively used in the present novel. It is further noticed that another character, namely Arjumand Harappa also feels that she lives a meaningless life. The narrator depicts her situation as: "'God damn,' Arjumand said to her mirror, unconsciously reflecting the former habit of her mother alone in Mohenjo, 'life is shit'" (157). Through Arjumand's words, it is realized that she is helpless as she lives a meaningless life. Arjumand is helpless as she cannot express her love for her lover as he gets engaged with another girl. She feels distressed and helpless and she does not have any control on her own life. She herself says that her life is meaningless. Iskander Harappa has been hanged to death. His wife Rani Harappa does not cry at his death. Mrs. Harappa's behaviour shows that Mr. Harappa lived a meaningless life. The narrator writes about his death and Rani Harappa's emotions for her husband;

They hanged him in the middle of the night, cut him down, wrapped him up and gave him to Talvar Ulhaq, who put him into a plane and flew him to Mohenjo, where two women waited under guard. Rani and Arjumand were driven by staff car to Sikandara, that outlying zone of Mohenjo where Harappas had always been buried. And saw amid

the marble umbrellas of the tombs a fresh, deep hole. Talvar Ulhaq at attention beside the white-swathed body. Rani Harappa, white-haired now, like the phantom of Pinkie Aurangzeb, refused to cry. 'So, it's him,' she said. Talvar bowed, stiff-necked, from the waist. 'Prove it,' said Rani Harappa, 'Show me my husband's face.' (186-187)

Rani Harappa does not lament on the death of her husband. She does not have any emotions for Iskander Harappa. The above paragraph discloses meaninglessness of Mr. Harappa's life. The above paragraph is noticeably an appropriate example of postmodern literature. Postmodern literature especially postmodern fiction does not lament the sense of meaninglessness of life. It is, once again, studied that the behaviour of officials at Harappa's office also does not reveal any respect for his corpse. The narrator describes this situation in the following lines.

Their Chief Warder, a certain Captain Ijazz, a young barrel of a fellow with toothbrush hair and a persistent fuzz on his upper lip which obstinately refused to thicken into a moustache, at first attempted to goad them into it. 'God knows what you women are,' he shrugged. 'You rich bitches. Your man is dead but you will not wet his grave.' Rani Harappa refused to be provoked. 'You are right,' she replied, 'God knows. And He also knows about young men in uniforms. Brass buttons cannot hide a thing from Him.' (188)

The above paragraph exposes meaninglessness of Harappa's life as his own wife refuses to mourn on his death. Soldiers in Harappa's army also observe that Mr. Harappa's life has been lost and he lived a meaningless life. The narrator further narrates that the routine life of Rani Harappa is not affected even after her husband's death. She continues to embroider her shawls sitting at the verandah. It is described in the following lines.

During those years spent beneath the suspicious eyes of soldiers and in the cold breezes of her daughter's solitude Rani Harappa continued to embroider woolen shawls. 'House arrest changes very little,' she admitted to Captain Ijazz at the very beginning, 'speaking for myself. It just means there are new faces around to say a few words to now and then.' (188)

The above cited paragraph shows that Rani Harappa is not emotionally affected by her husband, Mr. Harappa's death. She lives a normal life as she used to live before. This noticeably depicts that Iskander Harappa was not able to fulfill his responsibilities towards his family and as a result his own wife does not lament on his death. Therefore, it can be stated that Iskander Harappa lives a meaningless life. Rani Harappa embroiders eighteen shawls and she depicts Mir Harappa's dead body quite accurately. The description of the corpse also shows the meaninglessness of Mir Harappa's life. The narrator describes this situation as;

She had delineated his body with an accuracy that stopped the heart, leaving out nothing, not the disemboweling, not the tear in the armpit through which Mir's own heart had been removed, not the torn-out tongue, nothing, and there was a villager standing beside the corpse, with his bewildered remark sewn in black above his head, 'It looks as if,' the fellow said, 'his body has been looted, like a house.' (195)

The narrator portrays the meaninglessness of Mir Harappa's life in these words. Meaninglessness of characters' lives in the novel has been portrayed successfully and therefore, *Shame* is an appropriate example of postmodern novel. It is noticed that Bilquis also experiences a meaningless life in the later part of the novel. The narrator writes that she does not have any control on the situations in her life. Her situation is depicted as:

Things had been chipping away at Bilquis for years, firewinds and pennant-waving knights and murdered cinema managers and not having sons and losing her husband's love and brain-fever and turkeys and erratum slips, but the worst thing of all was to be there, in that palace, that queenly residence of which she had always dreamed, and to discover that that wasn't any good either, that nothing worked out, everything turned to ashes. Ruined by the hollowness of her glory, she was finally broken by the decline of her favourite Good News, who lay suffocating beneath the soft avalanche of her children and would not be comforted... one morning they all saw Bilquis putting on a black burqa, taking the veil or purdah, even though she was indoors and only family members and servants were present. (208)

The above paragraph reveals that Bilquis is not able to experience high life available to her and gradually loses control over every situation in her life. Bilquis used to prefer her younger daughter, Good News to Sufiya Zinobia, but she does not like her own daughter any more. She starts wearing veil in her own house and tries to cover her face. The narrator describes her situation;

She was scarcely capable of speaking except in metaphors. Her mumbles were full of curtains and oceans and rockets, and soon everybody got used to it, and to that veil of her solipsism, because everyone had their own problems. Bilquis Hyder became, in those years, almost invisible, a shadow hunting the corridors for something it had lost, the body, perhaps, from which it had come unstuck. Raza Hyder made sure she stayed indoors... and the house ran itself, there were servants for everything, and the mistress of the C-in-C's residence became less than a character, a mirage, almost, a mumble in the corners of the palace, a rumour in a veil. (208- 209)

The above paragraph makes it clear that Bilquis starts living a meaningless life. Omar Khayyam Shakil gets married to Sufiya Zinobia but her ayah, namely Shahbanou does not allow him to sleep with Sufiya Zinobia. Sufiya has not grown mentally and she is still a small seven-year child. Shahbanou takes care of her and is fairly possessive about her. Therefore, for this obvious reason, Shahbanou prevents Omar Khayyam from having physical union with her. Instead, Shahbanou prefers to sleep with Shakil and she herself satisfies his sexual desires by sleeping with him every night. The narrator successfully depicts the meaninglessness of Omar Khayyam Shakil's life. Shakil loves Sufiya and wishes to cure her mental illness but fails and as a result he has to satisfy his sexual desires by sleeping with his wife's ayah, namely Shahbanou. The narrator writes about Shakil as:

It is not simple, Omar Sahib,' she replied, 'and you're not such a wreck as you say.' After that she came to him every night, except during her times of the month and the days of fertility, and on those seven or eight nights he lay in the grip of his voluntary

insomnia imagining her body like a wire beside him in the bed, and wondering about the strange destiny which had led him to marry one wife and to acquire quite a different one. (212)

Here, it is observed that the main character, Omar Khayyam Shakil himself lives a meaningless life. He married Sufiya Zinobia with the hope that she will get well soon and he would be able to live a happy life with her. He loves her a lot and tries to cure her as well but in vain. He has to gratify his sexual desires not from his wife, Sufiya Zinobia but from her wife's ayah, Shahbanou. The narrator, once again highlights the relationship between Omar Khayyam Shakil and Shahbanou as: "Omar Khayyam and Shahbanou: our peripheral hero has acquired a shadow bride, and his own shadow has been enabled, as a result, to grow less" (212). These lines show that though Omar is the hero of the novel, he experiences a meaningless life and also suffers in his life as he is not able to receive his true love. It is also studied that the major characters like Iskander Harappa also feel that life is meaningless. He was the Prime Minister of his country, but finally, he is unable to help himself. The narrator describes his situation, "the end of the six-month trial, Iskander Harappa and also the absent Mr. Haroun Harappa were sentenced to hang by the neck until dead. Iskander was immediately moved into the death-cell at Kot Lakhpat jail. He was given just seven days, instead of the usual thirty, to lodge an appeal" (228).

The above paragraph shows that Mr. Harappa's helplessness and his mental situation leads to meaninglessness of his life. There are many such events through which the narrator depicts the characters living a meaningless life. Characters' feeling of helplessness and meaninglessness is a major postmodern literary feature. This feature frequently occurs in the novel. Using the feelings of helplessness and meaninglessness in the lives of the characters, Rushdie has shed light on how people from Pakistan and their rulers misused the freedom.

Conclusion

To conclude, Rushdie's *Shame* has been analysed as a postmodern novel. The novelist has depicted the meaningless of life of his characters in writing this illustrated novel. He has also applied metafiction narrative technique in which readers are always conscious of the fact that they are reading a novel. Meaninglessness, helplessness, uncertainty, anxiety, crisis of identity, rootlessness, hybridity of history, culture and religion are the striking characteristics of postmodern literature. The novel has all the basic postmodern literary features and postmodern themes. Thus, the novel ends as it begins with violence and shame. The characters presented in *Shame* necessarily experienced these feelings in their lives.

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