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**Problematizing History in Salman Rushdie's *Shame***



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**Abstract**

The purpose of the present research paper is an attempt to study Salman Rushdie's *Shame*, which is a postmodern historical novel and can be labeled as a "Historiographic Metafiction". The research paper will argue that Rushdie's *Shame* can be read as subversive text that problematizes the boundary between history and fiction, and questions the monology and claim to objectivity of historical representation. The text is analyzed with respect to its use of different voices and alternative histories, through Rushdie's emphasis on how history is a human construct. For instance, in this text Salman Rushdie explores the history of Pakistan's Politics from his point of view, which disrupts the historical realism of Pakistan's Politics.

**Keywords**

Postmodernism, Historiographic metafiction, history, Salman Rushdie's *Shame*, fiction

## Research Paper

### Historiographic Metafiction

“Historiographic metafiction” is a term coined by Canadian literary theorist Linda Hutcheon in the late 1980s. The term is used for works of fiction, which combine the literary devices of metafiction with historical fiction. According to Hutcheon, in *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, works of historiographic metafiction are “those well-known and popular novels which are both intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personages”.

It is obsessed by history; it is concerned with historical events, it makes history its subject and reflects on historiography. It combines metafictional elements with particular and deep attention to history, including three genres, literature, history and theory, as one. It is exactly the literary, self-conscious combination of history and fiction. Postmodern theory challenges the separation of the literary and the historical: they are both modes of writing, linguistic constructs and intertextual. It raises the issue of what writing about history implicates, questioning the sense and the various possible interpretations of the past. Hutcheon argues that historiographic metafiction is inherently contradictory: it works within conventions in order to subvert them. While claiming reference to the historical world, it doubts and plays with such a world. Historiographic metafiction must live with the double awareness of its fictionality and its foundation in real events.

Postmodern historical novels critically revisit the past; their interest in what has been before does not simply tally with a nostalgic return. They are concerned with the effects of historical forces on the lives of individual characters: to be recorded are the experience of great historical events and their consequent traumas. Contemporary experience is permeated by the past; therefore, the focus of the novels is on both the movement of history and the rhythms of ordinary life. In postmodern novels, historical events are proved to be deeply influential on the way in which the characters construct their understanding of their personal and national pasts present. They ask how to imagine the future unfolding from the past, inviting the reader to reflect on received versions of history. The process of building identity is connected to such reflection on the past. Postmodern historical novels question the received narratives of national identity.

Central to these novels is the question of how we imagine history, focusing on the limits and powers of reporting or rewriting the past. The investigation of the past is based on the longing to pinpoint the processes of representation that forms history. Historiographic metafiction

reveals the constructed, imposed nature of meaning; it plays upon the truth and lies of any historical record. With the presence of many possibilities of meaning, reality seems to fall to pieces; nonetheless, Hutcheon believes that historiographic metafiction is able to confront reality, though she does not believe in reality as a single, graspable entity. Reality is to be known only through its cultural representations. Postmodern historical novels also speak about the ability of fiction to approach truth in their accounts of past events. The characters of historiographic metafiction are not confident of their ability to know the past with any certainty; yet, they demonstrate to possess a historiographic consciousness. Throughout the novels, they seek to understand their own self in historical terms, finding some reassurance from the consciousness that there is a history behind them, obtaining some certainty from the awareness that they have something behind to look at and confront with. Historiographic consciousness is based on the development of the past; historiographic metafiction is interested in who had the power to compose truths about the past. If postmodern fiction does not aspire to tell the truth, at least it questions whose truth has hitherto been told.

#### **Problematizing History in *Shame***

*Shame* is “a sort of modern fairy-tale,” indicates its narrator. Rushdie brings out in his magic realist *Shame*, written in a fairy tale manner, his satire and criticism against the oppressive rule of Pakistani political and military leaders and the damage they give to the emergence of democracy in the country, and at the same time, he elaborates on the close relationship between *Shame* and violence. The novel depicts the life of its hero, Omar Khayyam Shakil, who bears the same name as the Persian poet and through Omar Khayyam; it explores the lives of two families who take an active role in the national politics. Although the narrator says that his fictional country is not Pakistan, the parallelisms he creates and his insistent denials make it clear that he is writing about Pakistan and its recent political past. Two Pakistans are created in the novel, one fictional and one factual existing side by side:

The country in this story is not Pakistan, or not quite. There are two countries, real and fictional, occupying the same space, or almost the same space. My story, my fictional country exists, like myself, at a slight angle to reality.

The reader, however, is expected to know that behind the imaginary country as the setting of the novel is Pakistan, as it is implied by the narrator’s play with words through which he creates an intended confusion. Rushdie, in this way, makes it possible to insert historical events and personages into the fairy-tale narrative of the novel, blending them with fictional characters to challenge the truth-value of these historical “facts” and to create alternative versions of them.

The “real” Pakistan gives the writer the opportunity to reflect the recent political history of the country. Rushdie refers to the political events of the period such as the division of India after Independence to allow for the formation of Pakistan as a separate independent country in 1956, the 1971 war over Bangladeshi Independence and the following secession of Bangladesh, and the execution of Bhutto in 1979; and he also inserts real political figures of the time as his characters but under different names. Thus, Iskander Harappa stands for Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, who managed to resume civilian rule after the succession of East Pakistan, while General Raza Hyder stands for General Ziya ul-Haq, who deposed Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and sentenced him to death, and so became the country’s third military president.

Amongst the other key allegorical figures in the novel, President Shaggy Dog mirrors the martial law administrator General Agha Mohammad Yahya Khan. Sheikh Bismillah caricatures the popular Bengali leader and first prime minister of Bangladesh, Sheikh Mujib.

However, Rushdie handles the historical material in the magic realist narrative of the novel with a self-reflexive narrator, which points to the constructedness of historical facts at the same time. Thus, *Shame* can be read as historiographic metafiction.

The narrator stands “at a slight angle to reality” to reflect critically, in a satirical tone, and so does the “fictional” Pakistan to allow allegorical readings. Unlike the other novels that have been analyzed in this thesis, *Shame* does not insert a historical figure into the fictional world of the text directly, which forces the reader to approach them symbolically. In the writer’s *Midnight’s Children*, Indira Gandhi emerges as a fictional character, or in Winterson’s novels, the reader comes across, for instance, Napoleon, King Charles, Cromwell, as her characters. In *Shame*, on the other hand, Rushdie uses different names for his historical characters or keeps their names untold like “General A.” who stands for General Ayub Khan, president during 1958– 69. The narrator, however, implies the resemblances between the fictional characters and the factual political figures in Pakistan’s past. By means of this, it becomes possible to read *Shame* as a “national allegory” in which the characters of the novel correspond to real political persons to give way to the satire of oppressive dictatorial regimes. Although it is claimed in the novel that the narrator reflects an imaginary country, some historical facts find their places in the magic realist narration of Rushdie as listed above. He uses his satire as a weapon against the violence caused by a dictatorial regiment symbolized by the rule of both General Raza Hyder and Iskander Harappa in *Shame*; and “[t]he reader is never left in any doubt as to who (individually) or what (socially, culturally, politically) Rushdie is pointing his less-than-subtle satirist’s finger at. This is no fairy tale for children”.

The narrator reveals that he needs this real and fictional presentation of two Pakistans side by side to explore, along with the history of Pakistan, the theme of Shame and violence, embodied by Raza Hyder's daughter, Sufiya Zinobia. He explains:

I have found this off-centric to be necessary; but its value is, of course, open to debate. My view is that I am not writing only about Pakistan.

Another quality of the novel which helps to show history as a constructed reality is the self-conscious narrator of the novel. Like Saleem Sinai in *Midnight's Children*, the narrator in the writer's *Shame* makes self-reflexive remarks on the construction of his story, making comments on the reliability of his narration as well. He includes himself as Omar's friend, who narrates his story, but he problematizes, with self-aware notes, his right to tell the story of Omar Khayyam and he points out that he made up some of the content

Maybe my friend should be telling this story, or another one, his own; but he doesn't write poetry any more. So here I am instead, inventing what never happened to me.

Therefore, Rushdie's *Shame* is not only about the political history of Pakistan, but it is coloured with the stories he tells which are in opposition to the known facts.

#### **Conclusion:**

In the light of this analysis of *Shame* by Rushdie, it can be seen that the writer uses postmodern and metafictional aspects of his novel to subvert the monolithic discourse of history. The study has analyzed, in line with the postmodernist view of historiography and historical novel, Rushdie's *Shame* as "Historiographic Metafictions" and it has been claimed that this text of the novelist includes historical material along with metafictional self-reflexivity with the purpose of subverting the Eurocentric history writing.

In *Shame*, the decentralizing of the great historical figures in history is achieved by the writer this time by means of rewriting the recent political history of Pakistan through the perspectives of his peripheral characters. The history of Pakistan is told simultaneously with the stories of the people who are victims of past events and the tyranny of the political personages who Rushdie satirizes in the novel. In Rushdie's counter-narrative, the individual plays an active role and vies for the centre, and his/her voice is in conflict with that of the dominant. Therefore, the monolithic discourse of history can be opened to multivocality in Rushdie's *Shame*.

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