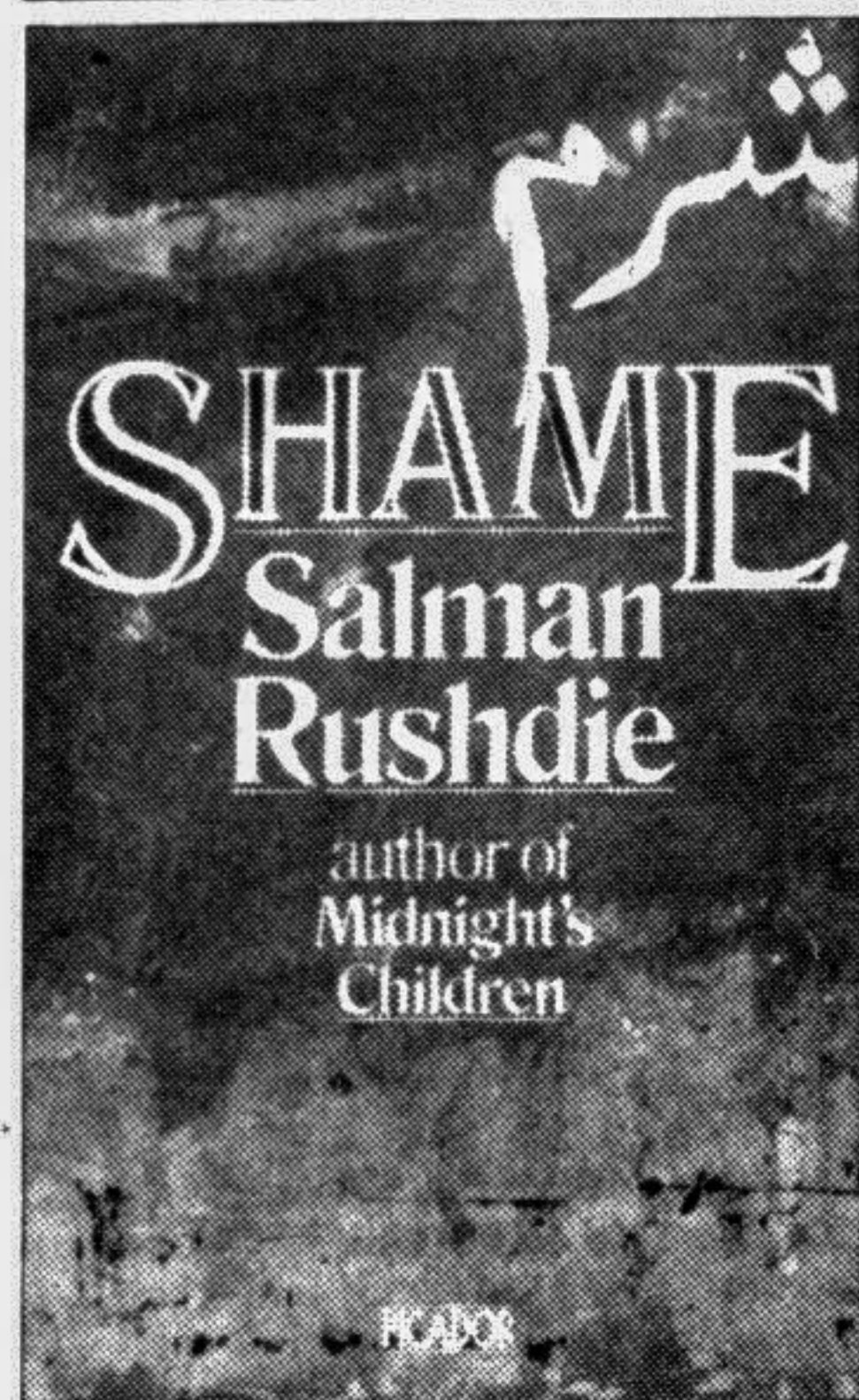


essay

Rushdie's *Shame* : His Story about Her Story

by Shamsad Mortuza



SHMAEL Reed once flayed the species better known as Male Feminist as wolf-in--sheep-skin (or vice versa). Salman Rushdie probably makes himself vulnerable to Reed's criticism while portraying the female characters in *Shame*.

Like any postmodern writer, Rushdie writes with a consciousness of the absence of all those old organising frameworks that presupposed the privileging of various centres (i.e. Euro-centric, ethno-centric, gender-centric, logo-centric and so on). *Shame* celebrates the demise of the old gender-centric paradigm. Rushdie traces back/forward shame to shamelessness and further back/forward to violence.

It all starts in East London. Rushdie refers to the killing of an Asian girl by her father. The daughter was slaughtered like a "halal chicken" because of her alleged sex with a white boy. The second event that breeds the ideas of shame/shamelessness in Rushdie is the beating up of a group of white boys by another Asian girl.

Rushdie invests his imagination to reincarnate the dead Asian girl, a usual attractive teenager. "I glimpsed her: now innocent, now whore, then a third and a fourth thing. Finally she eluded me, and I realised to write about her, about shame, I would have to go back East."

Sufiya Zinobia is thus the *Shame* incarnate. She is the epitome of shame and shamelessness. She is what she is

Saleem Sinai in *Midnight's Children* is the "cause incarnate" of all these splitting aparts. Sufiya Zinobia in *Shame*, on the other hand, is the "shame incarnate". Sufiya, however, maintains a low profile compared to her male counterpart in *Midnight's Children*. She is not what she is supposed to be. In a highly patriarchal society her biological difference restricts her from being anything at all. The rubescent Sufiya Zinobia blushes at her birth as her father, Raza Hyder, a Brigadier and the future president, "tried to affect biology by a superhuman act of will." Sufiya contracts a brain fever and never recovers from her "shameful" birth. With a six-year-old brain in a 19-year-old body, Sufiya becomes the epitome of shame and shamelessness. In her frenzied state, Sufiya routs her surroundings. She tears off the heads of hens, goes for the

neck of her brother-in-law, or kills four young men after seduction.

Sufiya's violent act surfaces like an eruption of long-repressed "shame". She takes four men at a time before killing them when she senses the awkward relationship between her husband and her old maid. The number 'four' is significant because in Sharia laws one male is permitted to marry four times. Again, her name Sufiya bears another religious echo, pointing at the Sufi sect. Even such trifle creates a serious shock for the existing order, the Bethlehem of traditional values created over the years by the patriarch society and by extremity of religion.

Sufiya's unnatural violence is explained as a direct by-product of the clash between shame and shamelessness. Sufiya is Rushdie's beauty and the sleeping beast. The archetypal beauty-and-the-beast skeleton of *Shame* gains political flesh in Rushdie's modern ifairy tale. Most of the female characters are somehow related to the political centre dominated by male of the species. They do not thrust themselves into the centre like the all-important Saleem Sinai. On the contrary, they remain at the gallery while all the action goes on at the centre-court with the males participating in it.

Aizaz Ahmad in his *In Theory* says, "every woman (in *Shame*), without exception, is represented through a system of imageries which is sexually overdetermined; the frustration of erotic need, which drives some to frenzy and others to nullity, appears in every case to be the central fact of woman's existence."

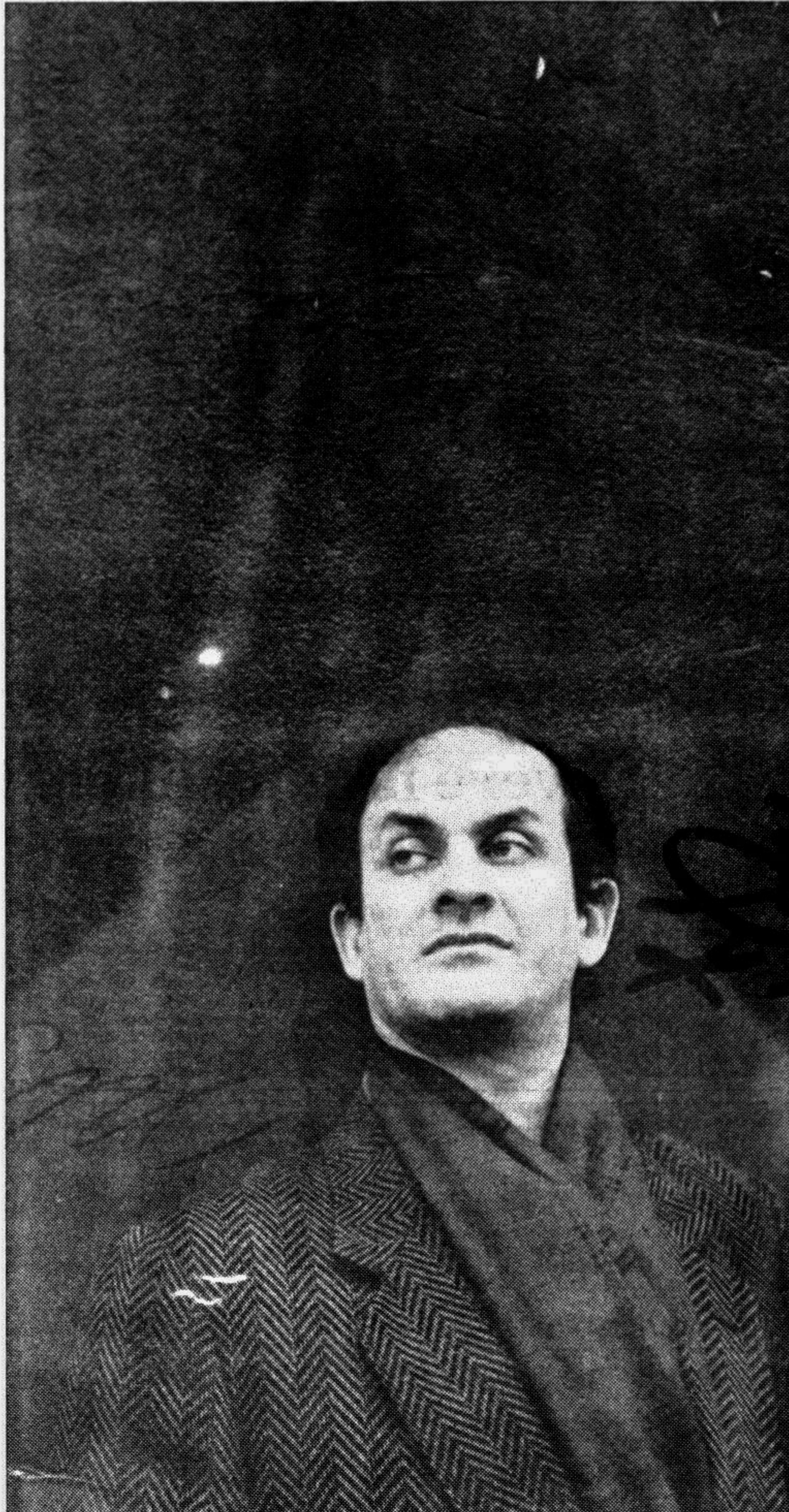
Facts are peculiarly volatile in Rushdie's texts. Aizaz Ahmad's "central fact" of Rushdie's female characters in *Shame*, as I understand, ignores the vitality of women. Even Gayatri Spivak finds the women seem powerful in *Shame* only as monsters.

The women in *Shame*, I feel, radiate power. This power can topple down the dictator Raza Hyder. At the end of the novel, it appears that the women are working in an invisible liaison. Sufiya's rampage only hastens the downfall of president Hyder. He tries to escape his fate sporting in the black veil prepared for him by his wife, Bilquis Hyder. He finally takes shelter at the Shakil Mansion at Q, where the three-sisters stab him to death for killing their second son in a military act.

The Shakil sisters - Chhunni, Munnee, and Bunny - maintain the grotesque features of Macbeth's three witches. Together like the three letters - Shin, Re, and Meem - they form Sharam (*Shame*). The presence of such sharam can only find its outlet in violence. Thus the three sisters of Q, find the central patriarch figure at their disposal to wreak vengeance. When they kill Reza in bath towel, we remember the killing of Agamemnon. In an inverted world the "cow gored the bull."

But the male world is not ready to credit the female for this uncharacteristic evil-deed. Like the Aeschylean chorus who were happy to find the male Aegisthus as an accomplice of Clytemnestra, the police potted at Omar Khayya for the killing of Raza Hyder. What could have been a revenge tragedy becomes a black comedy in Rushdie's world.

When falsely accused of killing the president, Omar Khayyam tells the interrogators: "I am a peripheral man. . . Other persons have been the princi-



Salman Rushdie

pal actors in my life story. Hyder and Harappa, my leading men. . . I watched them from the wings, not knowing how to act. I confess to social climbing, to only-doing-my-job, to being cornerman in other people's wrestling matches."

Suddenly, Omar Khayyam's confession with deliberate stage references transforms the whole events into a play-within-a-play, or a mise-en-abyme, in postmodern terms. We understand, why Rushdie has laboured so much to garb his real world in an anti-realist attire. The anachronistic references start making senses when the narrator in *Shame* says: "The country in this story is not Pakistan, or not quite. There are two countries, real and fictional, occupying the same

space. My story, my fictional country exists, like myself, at a slight angle to reality. I have found this off-centring device to be necessary; but its value is, of course, open to debate. My view is that I am not writing only about Pakistan."

This off-centring device, as we have seen, demands positioning of the subject into the centre. The subject [s/he] interprets her or his version of history from her or his perspective. Rushdie, on several occasions, recognises his immigrant experience as the key factor for his resort to imaginative flight or sink into the fictive world. But Rushdie's narrators cannot remain sunk in the fictive world for long. Occasionally, they surface and breathe in the real world. The narrator thus

comes up with his view of histories - the history of dominance, the history of mutual enslavement, and so on. The narrator in *Shame* is a commentator who participates and constructs history. He says: "To build Pakistan it was necessary to cover up Indian history, to deny that Indian centuries lay just beneath the surface of Pakistani Standard Time. The past was re-written; there was nothing else to be done. . . It is possible to see the subsequent history of Pakistan as a duel between two layers of time, the obscured world forcing its way back through what-had-been-imposed."

But sometimes, it seems, Rushdie himself does not know what is the point of all his efforts in shifting. Like Omar Khayyam he wants to cry out, "God knows what you will change with this shifting, shifting." Perhaps, like the Anzengr Shabbir, Mr. Eduardo Rodrigues [does not sound that Anzengr though], Rushdie believes that "it is necessary to be unusual . . . if one wants to spread the word."

True, Rushdie has been shrouded with controversies because of his unusual ways of handling with existing values. He has been charged with religious and political offences. In some countries, embargoes have been clamped on his writings and reward for his head. But, if a text is guilty of hurting the sentiment of a sect of readers, the readers are at their liberty to discard the text. The growth of Culture is necessitated by integration and disintegration. Annihilation of culture is not expected or possible either. If an "english" text possesses academic merit, it, then, deserves the right to be included in our syllabus of the "english" Department. As students of literature and cultural studies, we need to find out the impact of Rushdie's attention-drawing-mission on the archive of world literature. We must listen to the noise that Rushdie is trying to make *Outside the Whale*.

Dipesh Chakrabarty appears sound enough when he argues in favour of "easily" including Rushdie in the English Departments offering courses on postcolonialism.

He says: "[d]ominance of Europe as the subject of all histories is a part of a much more profound theoretical condition under which historical knowledge is produced in the third world. . . The everyday parade of third world social science is that we find these theories, in spite of their inherent ignorance of "us", eminently useful in understanding our societies. What allowed the modern European sages to develop such clairvoyance with regard to societies of which they were empirically ignorant? Why cannot we, once again, return the gaze?"

Returning the gaze involves pointing out of the flaws in the lens through which the West view the rest. Linda Hutcheon's observation on *Midnight's Children* can be a good example. Hutcheon states:

Saleem Sinai [though] narrates in English . . . his intertexts for both writing history and writing fiction are doubled: they are, on the one hand, from Indian legends, films, and literature and, on the other, from the West - The Tin Drum, Tristram Shandy, One Hundred Years of Solitude, and so on. (1989:65)

While Hutcheon takes the trouble to identify the references drawn by Rushdie from the West, she makes no attempt to distinguish the Oriental raw materials. One cannot blame her for this simply because these refer-

ences are not/little-known to her. She can at best broadly generalise the categories of references. In her *Poetics and Politics* Linda Hutcheon talks a lot about chutney which is explained by Rushdie himself. iRocket paan, i inibu paanil or iladdooi fail to appeal to the Occidental critique. Similarly, much of the textual flavour is ignored/missed by Hutcheon who offers a thorough reading of Rushdie. Salman Rushdie himself had to write essays to point out what has been amiss. His essay, *Errata* is a case in point.

This ignorance, both shared and unstated, happens to us when we read the canonical texts. Relying heavily on Western interpretation of the texts, we meet Chaucer or Eliot in the classroom. But the world-world projected by Rushdie, and other postcolonial writers from the continent, is more close to us at least in terms of the raw-materials they are dealing with. We are more familiar with the infighting of the Pakistani generals or the Indian politicians than the allegorised Whigs and Tories in Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*.

Rushdie's has done history with a purpose. One is at once liberty to question the justification of Rushdie's histories. Rushdie knows Realism, albeit with the Marquesian prefix of "Magic", can hurt. Rushdie agonises in *Shame*. His agonies are that of a writer in prison, in [self]-exile. He writes with the fear of going down the drain before reaching his readers. (The financial security perhaps provide little solace for the artist).

Rushdie's project of telling and retelling history in his metafiction appears almost as gossip. According to Gayatri Spivak: "If the project of the novel is gossip, the postcolonial Lebenswelt [the praxis and politics of life] wrenched it into rumour. . . Upon the wing of that rumour, the metropolitan migrant heterogeneity . . . forged a collectivity which they could stage as a strike for the Imam against the West."

Rushdie launches an all-out attack on the canons in a bid to locate himself, along with other marginal writers, in the centre. I leave it to Rushdie to explain his case. In *Imaginary Homelands*, he speaks of World Literature instead of any narrow term like Commonwealth Literature, and says: "Commonwealth literature should not Exist. If it did not, we could appreciate writers for what they are, whether in English or not; we could discuss literature in terms of real groupings, which may well be linguistic, which may also be international, and based on imaginative affinities; and as far as Eng. Lit. itself is concerned, I think that if all English literatures could be studied together, a shape would emerge which would truly reflect the new shape of the language in the world, and we could see that Eng. Lit. has never been in better shape, because the world language now also possesses a world literature, which is proliferating in conceivable direction."

Rushdie, I believe, even if we simply take the instance of his mastery over the off-centring device, has proved his worth to be at the heart of the literary canons. It is really time to admit that the centre cannot hold. The reign of the slouching beast, however rough he is, is simply a matter of time.

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reflections

Literature and the Reader

by Andaz

HOW are readers affected by literature? Apart from how writers look at literature and language, how genius treat language? What words do to us, and what we can do to words? What are the effects of technology on language? Can low-brow readers offer their views on literature? Or is it like corpses looking for an undertaker, as Ronald Coase remarked - he is the Nobel Prize winner for Economics in 1991, and who never had any formal education in this discipline.

Technology is like a passing scene from a moving window, while literature is like looking at a starry sky - the great and mysterious Unknown, the macrocosm of language. Language is fossil poetry, remarked Emerson; while the limitations of words create a resistance to overcome it, driven on by divine discontent; not for development, but more for enrichment, of a

tool at once creative and communicative.

Every man is a quotation from all his ancestors, asserted Emerson (he thought a lot about L&L), and the ultimate source is the aboriginal power. Individuality unsuccessfully tries to clamp copyright on the world, bites the python, but is ultimately gobbled up by the primeval aboriginal boa. If the earth looks like an apple from the moon, it is too big to eat when standing upon it.

We are back to square one - words are fashioned by beliefs, traditions, and mythologies. On the other hand, literature is the Olympic of talks and of writing. The records are in the books - to be broken.

Technically minded readers are reminded of the movement of the electrons in the semi-conductors (transistors, ICs), which carry information in a medium neither fully

conductive nor fully insulated. Frictions are the building blocks.

Three larger-than-life topics (language, literature and technology) cannot be confined within a restricted column; but the urge to communicate with the readers (I am one myself) is irresistible, after going through Richard Poirier's book *The Renewal of Literature - Emersonian Reflections* (Random House, 1987).

Literary criticism that stimulates comes along after long intervals. Poirier is well practised in the game, with earlier displays, such as *The Place of Style in American Literature*, *Compositions and Decompositions in the Languages of Contemporary Life*, and studies on Henry James and Robert Frost; and as the former Editor of the *Partisan Review*. He sparks ideas by his astute observations, tickling the latent creativity in his readers.

The author draws extensively from the sentences of Emerson to find nuances which are elusive to captured readers of this great American poet, philosopher and essayist.

There are many paradoxical statements which are likely to puzzle the innocent reader of literature, who wishes to pass some time in non-critical bliss. The origin of language is outside culture; and the use of language is to go beyond it. Emerson put it this way "language is a hindrance to the infinitude of private man." Modern books are complex as god is not needed (H James), so watch for the nakedness of learned nakedness (Poirier).

How about this: "Works of art are not required to exist because there is nothing outside of them that require their existence". Then comes William James (via Emerson) with the comment "language works against our perception of truth".

A genius is unfathomable, and uncontainable; and breaks all the rules of convention, only to set new ones, at higher or different levels. He increases the radius of consciousness of the human mind; exposing solid materials out of foggy foregrounds, and shifting existing backgrounds to no-man's-land.

Language is a mediation, not a media, unlike the products of modern technology, radio and television. Literature should not leave a clear image, unlike TV; but, like classical Chinese painting, leave something to the reader's imagination, enabling him to be interactive - a concept, by the way, used in modern computers and intelligent networks. Originality is a hard taskmaster, for the creator, and for the partaker, calling for a mixture of concentration and dedication, for minds seeking entertainment in this rarefied world of language and litera-

ture. Using a modern technical term, perhaps there is the human urge to digitalize the language as a tool of creativity; although the appreciation of the final product, as in all arts, including Nature, is in the analogue domain.

An Eastern mind, familiar with Emerson's intuitive mind, faces a sharp contrast in the presence of Poirier's analytical nuances, trying to explain Emerson's enigmatic thoughts, using western tools. But he does his job brilliantly, teasing the reader to be alert, and to switch on his thinking mode. The first Emerson cannot be analysed, and a second Emerson cannot be synthesized by the scientists, or by the critics.

This book is a good escape from babelish Dhaka's madding strife.

-Dhartri Feature