Book Reviews, Notes on Contributors, Notes on Editorial Advisors

Anna Rutherford
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Abstract
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This journal article is available in Kunapipi: https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol6/iss2/25

Salman Rushdie’s new novel *Shame* continues the fictional history of the subcontinent from his *Midnight’s Children* and brings it up to date in a thinly disguised allegory of the rise and fall of President Bhutto of Pakistan and the realities of the present dictatorship of President Zia. There is much that can be said about Rushdie’s adventurous and courageous mythicising of recent historical fact, and of his attempts at extending the boundaries of the novel form. What is most fascinating in *Shame* is the mesmeric effect created by the cyclic mode of narrative, where past merges into future to comment on the present. Individual experience and national events are approached through varying points of view in a seemingly endless succession of tales involving the same families, communities, and nations to make a central moral theme.

Rushdie adopts the method of multiple voices so as not to have a swamping narrative voice. He was determined, he says, almost ‘to write a novel which didn’t have a central character, where there are nine or ten characters dancing round the centre, and different ones occupied the centre and then stepped out of it’. Such claims notwithstanding, the authorial voice is in total control whether as irrepressible narrator, or more daringly, in personal interventions. Not content with his bitterly comic representations of history, Rushdie enters the scene himself as author bearing witness to the violence of our times as it affects his community, his mother countries (the ‘peripheral’ hero of the novel, Omar Khayyam, is given three mothers representing, perhaps, the subcontinental trinity of India, Pakistan and Bangla Desh) and humanity.

These interventions serve as a base from which the novelist takes off into the fantasy of the novel with its spiralling, bloody accounts of private and public repression and injustice. Fictional realism is abandoned altogether: ‘Realism can break a writer’s heart. Fortunately, however, I am only telling a sort of modern fairy tale, so that’s alright. Nobody need get upset or take anything I say too seriously.’ This bantering tone is only occasional relief in the bitterly savage irony of the narrative. The theme of shame and shamelessness born from man’s public actions is endowed with heightened intensity by being related to violence done to the women of the land. Every public ‘heroic’ misdeed has its private familial link. Since *Shame* is really the story of two dictators and their families and through them of the nation and its people, this parallel mode of narrative works very well indeed. The focus on women is, in fact, central to the novel. As if to ascertain that the point is taken, Rushdie clarifies it:

‘I had thought, before I began, that what I had on my hands was an almost excessively masculine tale, a saga of sexual rivalry, ambition, power, patronage, betrayal, death, revenge. But the women seem to have taken over; they marched in from the peripheries of the story to demand the inclusion of their own tragedies, histories and comedies, obliging me to couch my narrative in all manner of sinuous complexities, to see my «male» plot refracted, so to speak, through the prisms of its reverse and
«female» side. It occurs to me that the women know precisely what they were up to — that their stories explain, and even subsume, the men's. Repression is a seamless garment; a society which is authoritarian in its social and sexual codes, which crushes its women beneath the intolerable burdens of honour and propriety, breeds repressions of other kinds as well....

I hope that it goes without saying that not all women are crushed by any system, no matter how oppressive. It is commonly and, I believe, accurately said of Pakistan that her women are much more impressive than her men ... their chains, nevertheless, are no fictions. They exist. And they are getting heavier.’ (Shame, p. 173)

Also central is the sensibility of the novelist as migrant, struggling to retain, to hold on to what memory is relinquishing; and perhaps, struggling equally painfully, to dump all that obstructs the way to continuity within change. These confrontations necessarily lead Rushdie to reflect on the Islamic code of honour and what to make of it in the context of the migrant’s life in London. It should not come as a surprise, then, that Shame was conceived, in part, after an incident in the East End of London. A Pakistani father murdered his only child, a daughter, because by making love to a white boy she had brought dishonour upon her family and only her blood could wash away the stain. Along with many of the community, Rushdie finds himself horrified by the act, and yet able to understand the compulsions that motivated the killer. And on to another incident, again in London, when a young Asian girl is set upon in a late night underground train by a group of teenage white boys and feels no anger — only shame. A shame so deep that she will not speak of the incident let alone lodge a complaint. How long can people be humiliated? Proceeding from his community outwards, he creates an awareness of violence in modern society, of smoking cities, of ordinary kids, nice people compelled to engage in wreckage and destruction because their humiliation and repression can no longer be contained. It must explode.

Such explosion in Shame is worked out in terms of nightmarish fantasy. The feeling of shame is embodied in the heroine of the fairy tale, Sufya Zenobia, daughter of Raza Hyder. But she is a special kind of daughter since her mental faculties stop developing after a severe bout of fever in childhood. She blushes at birth, perhaps for her mother’s infidelity and her father’s many sins; she is humiliated for being an idiot and blushes for the world and its shamelessness until she can contain her shame no more; she is then transmogrified into a beast that prowls the city streets and precipitates the fall of the dictator, her father. This is hardly helpful in an analysis of the novel as political allegory, and sadly, makes way for the argument that the migrant writer, or worse, the Indian writing in English, ‘can think no further than in terms of disintegration and explosions to unstick the pressures that suppression has built’ because ‘he is part of an elite brought up in English, reluctant shamefaced inheritors of the colonial tradition, cut off from the reality of deprivation and struggle’.

The same argument can be applied to Section III of Midnight’s Children and one is left with an unpleasant question which needs to be asked: Is it not possible to have an Indian novel in English that is not an overview of elites fighting for power but written with a perception of the struggle, faith and despair of the many at the mercy of these elites, and with an awareness of simple joys that do occasionally light up a bleak world? Such joys emanate from personal relationships, the human ties that bind, strengthen, and are the supportive base of all struggle. The closest one gets to such life-enhancing moments is in descriptions of Sufya Zenobia basking in the glow of paternal love. She remembers her father playing with her, and the happiness of being in the company of her sister’s children.
But then she is the idiot daughter and these perceptions, however true and valuable, are tinged with pathos rather than power.

All virtue in the novel is made to reside in Sufya Zenobia; she is innocence, purity, goodness; the repository of shame and humiliation as well as its embodiment; in fact, her very existence casts a blight on the lives of her family, and their shameless conduct destroys her, causing her to explode. It is an effective device in that it creates an overriding impression of a world gone mad with virtue to be found only in the abnormal one. The sane, when not evil in themselves, are wily, understand how to use guile, and die either corrupted or insane. A severe indictment indeed. Much of this is expressed through the experience of women and it is rewarding to leave aside the dictators and their machinations and look at their mothers, wives, mistresses and daughters.

These women presided over by Bariamma, the grand matriarch of the Hyder family, communicate a fair gamut of subcontinental female experience: the joint family ancestral home with its invasion of privacy and denial of individuality, its prying, eavesdropping, affectionate, supportive embrace; a family home ‘that bursts, positively bursts with family members and related personnel’ whose male members ‘import their wives to live and breed in battery conditions, like shaver chickens’; the pressures of having marriageable daughters and the upmanship displayed when one of the clan has ‘landed one of the prize catches of the marriage season’; wives who have to turn a blind eye to a husband’s infidelities and, should they presume to take a lover themselves, have to suffer in silence the knowledge of his mysterious disappearance; others whose ‘tongue is silenced by the in law mob’ and have to submit to the humiliation inflicted by a husband’s old retainers. Most desperate of all is the one who has to cope with the misfortune of not being able to bear a son.

Thus some of the moral sense in the novel is conveyed in the histories of these women, often through their silence and invisibility as in the case of Bilquiz, wife of Raza Hyder, who retreats from the world, is locked up by her husband, and finally takes refuge inside a burqah unable to face the sun of exposure. A tragic figure, she is first seen as starry-eyed dreamer, caught unawares in the destructive blaze of partition riots:

...she tore the clothes off her body until she stood infant-naked in the street; but she failed to notice her nudity because the universe was ending, and in the echoing alienness of the deadly wind her burning eyes saw everything was flying out, seats, ticket books, fans, and then pieces of her father’s shattered corpse and the charred shards of the future.

She is later rescued, and marries Captain Raza Hyder who makes her ‘a new woman’ and flies with her to ‘a bright new world’ where she has visions of queenly grandeur, for she ‘had discerned in Raza a boulder like quality on which she would build her life.... «What things won’t you do there Raz! ... What greatness, no? What fame?»’ Unimaginative and yearning for solidity, she is quite unprepared to cope with the winds of change that help her husband rise to power. His grand palaces are a confinement, the glitter is dulled to ashes, and the glare of the world is more than she can bear. Burdened with the shame of having borne first a still-born son, then an idiot daughter, racked by the hypocrisies of her conjugal and maternal love, she is finally destroyed by the birth of yet another daughter and the knowledge that she can bear no more children. Raza Hyder will never have a son and she feels him ‘withdrawing from her down the corridors of his mind, closing the doors behind him’. Later, though her mind begins to wander, she sees all too clearly that her husband’s rise to the peak as Chief Martial Law Administrator had been at the cost of countless human lives.
The women are portrayed as sagacious; even when most vulnerable they are able to perceive well-concealed realities. The wives — Bilquiz and Rani — of the two dictators, Chief Martial Law Administrator Raza Hyder and Chairman Iskandar Harappa, have been friends and mutually supportive until the deeds of their men sever the link. They are abandoned or cloistered, playthings or useful instruments; in the final analysis they emerge as poignantly discerning. It is Bilquiz, for instance, whose ‘crazed’ mind devises a way of escape for Raza from imminent doom. Marriage changes Rani Harappa, once an irrepressible chatty and happy girl, into a silent, submissive but unbeaten woman. Her husband is hanged; he is idolised by their daughter and venerated by the people. She alone knows the true chronicle of his crimes, and the intimate details of his dark side.

Rani once imagined marriage as freedom. Trapped in the deserted wastes of Isky’s luxurious country estate — Mohenjo — she unwraps her dreams, and sews her reality into patterned textures that trace the atrocities of Chairman Harappa’s life. In one of many imaginative strokes Rushdie allows Rani the freedom to occupy her solitary confinement with a silent vendetta. In her six years as prisoner, first of her husband and then of the Chief Martial Law Administrator, she weaves eighteen shawls in which she ‘perpetuates memories’. As the horrors unfold and the guilt is attributed, the prose is at its most evocative.

Just as in Midnight’s Children, the concluding chapters of Shame are deeply pessimistic, almost nihilistic, quite unlike the conventional fairy tale, though one is not looking for a conventional end. But disturbing questions remain. Both novels make a self-conscious use of subcontinental history and acquire much of their coherence and power from the political thrust of the narrative. Everything in life today is politics which is one of the points the novels wish to make; in the process we have a little too much of despair and too little about survival in a future of human hopes and expectations.

Rushdie has written in part an answer to such criticism levelled at Midnight’s Children:

The story of Saleem does indeed lead him to despair. But the story is told in a manner designed to echo, as closely as my abilities allowed, the Indian talent for non-stop regeneration. This is why the narrative constantly throws up new stories, why it ‘teems’. The form — multitudinous, hinting at the infinite possibilities of the country — is the optimistic counterweight to Saleem’s personal tragedy. I do not think that a book written in such a manner can really be called a despairing work.³

Taking the cue from this statement, the form of Shame is conceived on the same lines: the masculine side of the tale which is dark, evil and deserves destruction is counterbalanced by the feminine side in which the histories of women as victims convey the moral tone as well as the mother country’s potential for rebirth. If one were to search for parallels, one would have to go as far back as the Iliad where the misery and slaughter of the Trojan wars is relieved for a brief moment of tenderness and reality by the episode of Hector and Andromache. Troy would have vanished completely from our memories if it had not been for Homer’s heroes and heroines. The tragedies of the recent history of the Indian subcontinent, the shame of its violation and dismemberment, can perhaps be best expiated by recounting them so that the country’s potential for rebirth can be realised by those who have always been its custodians from the ancient times of Harappa and Mohenjodaro.
NOTES


The stories in Michael Morrissey’s collection are modally, and modishly, inventive; alert to experience but also to what they are doing to it. They hover anxiously between the word and the world, plotting the interaction of fiction, fantasy and perception. For this reason, the third part of the book, with its visions of a world pervaded by the fantasies characteristic of paranoia is particularly effective. The obsessed narrator of 'Leave Me On the Ice', trapped in air like soft jelly, is convincing, and his story is successful because its action is underpinned by a psychological motive. But perhaps this is imposing my own mundane expectations upon these stories. There is another way of looking at them.

Towards the end of 'Leave Me On the Ice' the narrator imagines ‘that final second [when] the ice is no different from the consciousness of the mind viewing it’. Something happens there which is similar to Heisenberg’s discovery that the observer interacts with the thing he observes, and Michael Morrissey’s stories are the records of an author acutely aware that writing fiction is also somehow like that. The attempt to describe, recount, relate rebounds upon itself, implicating the teller. He becomes conscious of himself, and focuses as much (or more) upon the process of storytelling, as upon the story itself.

Self-consciousness is apparent in various ways in these stories. Almost every piece is an experiment in narrative mode, and this in itself draws the reader’s attention to the performance. There are stories which explicitly display their fictional conventions (‘Crispin’s Wife’) or coyly resort to stock devices (‘Once upon a time there was a timid little boy called Franz Kafka’); sequences of stage directions (‘The Astronomer’); assemblies of numbered paragraphs (‘Paragraphs on Priscilla’, ‘Bread of Remembered Lives’, ‘16 Paragraphs on the Square’...); plausible sequences involving historical figures like Kafka and Jack Kerouac, and, conversely, stories which allude to other fictional incidents as if they had historical independence. Stories compete or interfere with each other (in ‘Crispin’s Wife’ and ‘That Is Not This Kind Of a Story’) or sometimes are just overheard as snatches of dialogue. There are brief pieces, verging on verse, which seem to have been contrived according to the rhythm, cadence and patterning of lines and short paragraphs; and even a few signs (in ‘The Letter, Bells, Creeping Boys’) of cut-up and fold-in operations.

Professor M. discovers the curious paradox about all this at the University of Flatland: ‘Mr Young, who was cloning off a few more students, said: «This department has of course no interest in writers as such, only in their verbal constructs.» This is how we are invited to regard some of Michael Morrissey’s pieces (at least on first acquaintance). But Mr Young (as Professor M. knows) has got it wrong. Drawing attention to a story as a construct diverts the reader’s response to the ingenuity of the teller rather than to the signifi-
cance of the tale. The old-fashioned faith in the tale and respect for the impersonality of the artist seems to have been superseded.

Michael Morrissey knows this as well as the Professor, hence the conflict in ‘How Professor M. Finally Graduated From the University of Flatland’, yet even so, his stories fall flat for me in places because they sometimes seem to be compelling admiration for the teller, rather than wonder at the tale.

Self-conscious modes of story-telling usually incline to comedy, and are sometimes productive of the easy comic effects by which awkward moments are passed off by exaggerating them, but Michael Morrissey has some genuinely funny creations, like the Spanish philosopher’s stylish ping-pong, and numerous incidents in the University of Flatland, which I found horribly familiar. There is an unusual and original humour in these stories which perhaps derives from the odd angles from which many of them are observed and related. Yet despite his gift for comedy and wry humour, Michael Morrissey sometimes withholds mockery from characters who appear ridiculous, or balances it with sympathy for the difficult paths of dissent and betrayal. There is a vein of seriousness in this collection which saves it from being a mere parade of narrative ingenuity, and suggests a consistency of attitude in the diversity of styles and modes.

The Fat Lady & The Astronomer won the New Zealand 1982 award for the best work of fiction.

BRUCE CLUNIES ROSS

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

Rudy Wiebe, Canadian novelist and critic, best known for his novel, The Temptations of Big Bear. Aritha van Herk, Canadian novelist and critic. Her novel Judith won the Seal Books $50,000 First Novel Award. Claire K. Harris is Trinidadian by birth and now lives in Canada. Cyril Dabydeen was born in Guyana and now lives in Ottawa. That city named him as their official poet of the year in 1984. David Dabydeen is Guyanese by birth and now lectures at the Centre for Caribbean Studies at Warwick University. His first collection of poems, Slave Song has just been awarded the Commonwealth Poetry Prize. Nissim Ezekiel, major Indian poet who lectures at the University of Bombay. Dieter Riemenschneider teaches at the University of Frankfurt. Andrew Gurr teaches at the University of Reading. He is the author of several books on post-colonial literatures and co-author of a book on Katherine Mansfield. Ivor C. Treby lives in London and has published in the UK, USA, and Australia. Basil George lives on the island of St Helena. He has just published the first book of verse from that island. John Barnie is a Welsh poet and critic. Michael Wilding is a novelist and short story writer. He teaches at Sydney University. Andrew Lansdown, West Australian poet and short story writer. His most recent collection of poems, Windfalls, has been published this year by Fremantle Arts Centre Press. Mark O’Connor, Australian poet. His latest collection, Fiesta of Men, was reviewed in Kunapipi, Vol. V, No 2. Vincent Buckley, Australian poet and critic. His memoirs, Cutting Green Hay (Penguin, 1983) received much acclaim. Ric Throssell is former director of the Commonwealth Foundation. He has written numerous plays, including For Valour (Currency) and a biography of his mother, Katharine S. Prichard, Wild Weeds and Windflowers. Idi Bukar is a Nigerian. His first volume of poems will be published shortly. J. O. J. Nwachukwu-Agbada is Nigerian. He has published two novels, and his poems have appeared both in magazines and journals in Nigeria. Chingoli Changa is a Malawian. Joyce Johnson teaches at the University of the Bahamas.
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