

The Locale and the People: A comparative study on Salman Rushdie's Novel, *Shalimar the Clown*.

¹**M.Maria Clastin Dias**

Reg.No: 19223114011024

Research Scholar

Department of English

NM Christian College

Marthandam

²**Dr. Prabha Punniavathi**

Head

Research Supervisor

Department of English & Research Centre

NM Christian College

Marthandam.

(Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Tirunelveli – 627 012)

Abstract

This paper shows how Salman Rushdie in his novel, *Shalimar the Clown* (2005) explores in comparison the locale and the setting, where the personal, symbolic, allegorical and historical events disrupt the co-existence and scenic natural landscape, through the micro-cosmic lives of the protagonists. The personal aspirations of central characters and the consequent results impact the landscape of Kashmir. Bhoomi or Boonyi, though is not directly responsible for the collapse of the order but at a personal level for many characters, it is certainly a momentous disturbance. The other factors that bring about changes are religious extremism and tensions, fundamentalism, nationalism, and militarism. A great divide was created. This divide deepened as years pass by and spread like wildfire. The poison consumes the heart and minds of most people. Kashmir was once a syncretic culture, but now gives way to a deeply divided society. The changing objectives and fortunes of the central characters parallel the transformations that take place in the physical world and at the same time in the cultural mindscape. This paper examines the transforming situations and how they bring about a shift in every aspect of life. Besides, it relates the link between the characters and their immediate world and how that link victimizes everyone. Thus the locale and the lives in the novel are connected and destined for a similar fate.

Keywords: destinies, syncretism, religious extremism, parallel, landscape, mindscape.

The destinies of the son of a Muslim headman and the daughter of Hindu pandit parents come together in a love. The central characters, Noman Sher Noman or Shalimar the Clown and Bhoomi Kaul or Boonyi are very young and passionately in love. Like the pretty, star crossed lovers, the natural and scenic surroundings were as young, fresh, full of life, yet to be fully discovered, full of mystery and wonderfully attractive. Shalimar was the king of troupe, a tight rope walker, and capable of even greater feats. "One day I'll really take off," he told her (Boonyi) after their first kiss. "One day I won't need the rope at all. I'll just walk into empty air and hang there like a cosmonaut without a suit" (Rushdie, *Shalimar* 57). He wants to fly high in life while connected down with Bhoomi. Shalimar wants to fly on top of the Chinar tree by his great skills in ropewalking. As Shalimar wants to excel high in life while being

with the beautiful Boonyi, Kashmir with its beautiful landscape would have excelled as a wonderful place. But Kashmir's and Shalimar's destinies are up for a challenge. The destinies are similar in dreadfulness, desecration of beauty, destruction of love, devastation of scenic landscape, death, bloodshed and revenge. Thus, the lives and the locale journey parallelly through a bumpy path towards revenge and death.

The ideal state of affairs despite the differences are evident in the union of the central characters. The cultural beauty and syncretism is perfect in line with the union of the central couple. As the young lovers want to get married, the community too has no objection to the marriage and Shalimar's father declares, "There is no Hindu – Muslim issue. Two Kashmiri – two Pachigami – youngsters wish to marry, that's all. A love match is acceptable to both families and so a marriage there will be; both Hindu and Muslim customs will be observed" (Rushdie, Shalimar 110). And Boonyi's father added, "To defend their love is to defend what is finest in ourselves" (Rushdie, Shalimar 110). This was accepted by everyone in the village, but against the wishes of the outsiders, the external divisive forces. People in their village accept the uniqueness and the integral difference in their separate religion but that did not divide them in any way. "Kashmiriyat, when experienced as a culture, is so syncretic that it inspires an epitomizing co-existence: man's oneness with man; man's oneness with nature" (Nayak 2003). As the first Prime Minister calls India as, "Though outwardly there was diversity and infinite variety among our people, everywhere there was that tremendous impress of oneness, which had held all of us together for ages past, whatever political fate or misfortune had befallen us" (Nehru).

Kashmir has been a unique place, geographically, culturally and politically. After Indian independence, Kashmir was accessed with India. But after the accord there were many discords to Kashmiri People. Guha records the signing of the accord. The signed document was collected by the minister named Menon in the Nehru's cabinet. It is Menon who took the signed Instrument of accession from Kashmir back with him to Delhi when he returned to New Delhi (68). Rushdie records the serene, abundantly beautiful locale and at the same time religiously peaceful and harmonious coexistence of the Kashmiris before all hell breaks loose. What was once an earthly paradise turns into a one hell of a place.

There is a symbolic clash of the external forces on the very nature of the internal tranquil landscape and the mindscape. The unity in diversity is challenged further by the arrival of Max Ophuls, the U.S Ambassador to India. Boonyi, fated like Anarkali, mesmerised Max with a stunning and captivating performance of Anarkali dance. Boonyi had a desire for something beyond Kashmir or Shalimar could offer. She was looking across the horizons of Kashmir. She believed her scope was much larger than her present choices. Boonyi, "... like Eve, gets easily tempted and eagerly accepts the Ambassador's offer of a change ..." (Mathur 92).

The syncretic and beautiful life is corrupted like the mechanical waste overwhelms the natural pristine landscape. The incorrupt life partner of Shalimar is coveted away to New Delhi. But the life she desired so much, the comfort of Max's physical love, a private apartment in Delhi, best dance teacher and very expensive gifts couldn't provide her the satisfaction which she really wanted. She began to hate her fate to be used as a concubine, to be locked up within the four walls of the house. The scandal started to stink in public. This so-called freedom which she longed for couldn't free her. On the other hand, she suffered, she bloated, she decayed, and she was, in a way incarcerated. Like a caged bird, she sings the sweet symphonies of Kashmir and Shalimar which she herself vandalised.

A comparison can be drawn on the lives and also on the locale of Kashmir. Rushdie connects the lives of Boonyi and Shalimar with that of Kashmir. The parallel lives of these protagonists and that of the locale are going through upheavals and desecrations. Boonyi's confined state in Delhi after Max's visit is also the situation of Kashmir bound by unfriendly

neighbours. Besides the spreading of religious extremism, there is also an increase in armed insurgencies and the deployment of a huge army of soldiers. Things changed very quickly for Kashmir. Kashmir suffers physically and culturally what Shalimar goes through in his heart, a cuckolded husband cheated by his own wife. Similarly, the extreme amount of extremism and nationalism divides Kashmir deeper and deeper. As Suhayl Saadi in her review of *Shalimar the Clown* says, “massive state repression, inter communal violence and increasingly fanatical religious ideologies turn the traditional magical vistas into a bloody Himalayan dystopia”.

The fight against the damage and the destruction of both the locale and the lives takes a different extremist and violent turn. Shalimar joins an insurgent terrorist organisation in order to take his revenge. Shalimar had already warned Boonyi, about moving out of their relationship. He once told her, “don’t you leave me now, or I’ll never forgive you, and I’ll have my revenge. I’ll kill you and if you have any children by another man, I’ll kill the children also” (Rushdie, *Shalimar* 61). He succeeds in killing Max and Boonyi but India Ophuls or Kashmira, Boonyi’s illegitimate daughter is armed and prepared for Shalimar as the novel closes. Shalimar’s revenge is Kashmir’s revenge or the legitimate vengeance of the lost idyllic Kashmir.

The novel presents the parallel destinies here. Rushdie while dealing with the fate of the love story of Boonyi and Shalimar engages himself with the ever-widening divisions, ever increasing violence and death and the ever-spreading unrest and tension in the valley. “The battle for Kashmir was, and is, not merely or even mostly a battle for territory. It is, as Josef Korbelt put it half a century ago, an ‘uncompromising and perhaps uncompromisable struggle of two ways of life, two concepts of political organization, two scales of values, two spiritual attitudes’” (Guha 79). The destructions of the Kashmiri villages is presented by Rushdie with a very close personal touch. Roy feels that the artist decolonises, the agendas of multinational corporations that is considered as the domain of the expert (140). As a political activist like Arundhati Roy, Rushdie says, “Approximately one hundred alleged insurgents and their alleged associates were being shot dead every day. ... Shootings, hangings, stabbings, decapitations, bombs were very common” (Rushdie, *Shalimar* 313).

The symbolic touch of the novelist is evident when Rushdie talks about the junk of war metals, the scrap junkyards which replaces the scenic beauty of the landscape of Kashmir. Scrap metal junkyards sprang up everywhere scarring the valley’s pristine beauty, like small mountain ranges made up of malfunctioning truck exhausts, jammed weaponry and broken tank treads. The important image here is that men were born out of these junks and he calls them iron mullahs. “Then one day by the grace of God the junk began to stir. It came to life and took on human form. ... They were the iron mullahs” (Rushdie, *Shalimar* 15). These mullahs advocated and preached what was never heard of among the Kashmiri people. They wanted Kashmiri men and women to behave as the iron mullahs expected. Women were asked to put on Burqa and such codes of dress and life that was propagated in Afghanistan. Kashmiri women never worn them and cared to cover their faces. Out of threat to face death or acid attacks, for the first time they shrouded themselves, their old and younger ones (Rushdie, *Shalimar* 277). The proud culture of Kashmiris thus endangered, and a new and unacceptable regime was taking over.

The central characters and the locale suffer simultaneously from the state of beauty and love to destruction and violent revenge. Boonyi (Bhoomi) and Shalimar (Noman) were born simultaneously in Shalimar Gardens in Kashmir. Shalimar means an abode of joy. Kashmir is a place of joy and heavenly abode. Rushdie laments the demise of real Kashmir with a warning. He says, “.... of all the many elephant traps lying ahead of us, the largest and most dangerous pit fall would be the adoption of a ghetto mentality. To forget that there is a world beyond the community to which we belong, to confine ourselves within narrowly defined

cultural frontiers would be, I believe, to go voluntarily into that form of internal exile which in South Africa is called the home land” (Rushdie, *Imaginary* 14).

Comparative and parallel destinies play out between the lives and locale of Kashmir through the microcosmic locale of Pachigami. The lives of the protagonists of *Shalimar the Clown* itself are micro cosmic expression of what Kashmir was, what Kashmir would have been and unfortunately what Kashmir became at the hands of those, nationalistic, extremist, neo – imperialistic grabbers. Through this novel as Cowley puts it, Rushdie expresses “...sadness for the ideal that has been lost in Kashmir and in so many parts of the Muslim world, the ideal of tolerance and secular pluralism” (27). Rushdie does a very deep analysis of the existence, possibilities and realities of Kashmir. “My India,” he claims, “has always been based on ideas of multiplicity, pluralism, hybridity: ideas to which ideologies of communalist are diametrically opposed” (Rushdie, *The Riddle* 32). Rushdie also observes, “You still think that home, at the end of a long journey, is a place where a man finds peace” (Rushdie, *The Enchantress* 231).

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