

## **Hypocrisy for Survival: Redefining Terrorism in *Shalimar the Clown*<sup>1</sup>**

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Published in 2005, *Shalimar the Clown* by Salman Rushdie is made up of two interlocking narratives: one a love story in a beautiful Himalayan valley, the other a brutal assassination of American ambassador. Set before “the catastrophic consequences of British India’s partition start to become clear” (Pitkin 258), the first story depicts Kashmir as a paradise with, multi-cultural groups, multi-faith tolerance, and yet an undisturbed harmony. Boonyi Kaul, a female protagonist playing beloved in the story, is a daughter of a Hindu *Pandit*. Shalimar the clown, a counterpart of the female protagonist, is a performer and tightrope walker whose father is the Muslim headman. The space they live is Kashmir and there is no antagonism, “... at the heart of Kashmiri culture there was a common bond that transcended all other differences” (Rushdie 180). Enjoying the condition of co-existence, the lovers get married and also receive the approval of society:

... ‘We are all brothers and sisters here,’ said Abdullah. ‘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 180)

This love-turned-to-conjugal-life story appears to constitute foundation for another story to bring in globally pervasive theme –terrorism. The second story, which culminates into an assassination, starts with the coming of Maximilian Ophuls, American Ambassador to Kashmir. Ophuls gets fascinated and subsequently elopes with Boonyi making Shalimar “a rage-filled jihadist” (Pitkin 258). Understandably, Shalimar hunts and succeeds to get access to Ophuls as his driver, which provides him comfortable space to accomplish his intention. Ultimately, Shalimar assassinates Ophuls: “The ambassador was slaughtered on her doorstep like a halal chicken dinner, bleeding to death from a deep neck wound caused by a single slash of the assassin’s blade” (Rushdie 5).

The murder story needs further analysis due to two important reasons. Firstly, *Shalimar the Clown* presents the idea contradictory to explicit proposition in his earlier novel *Satanic Verses* (1988), but in tune with pro-Islam statements that he made subsequent to threat to his life. Secondly, his remarks months after the publication of *Shalimar the Clown*,

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contrary to the content in the novel, reiterate his take fleshed out in the *Satanic Verses*, again. Taking Salman Rushdie's perpetual coming to terms with the notion of terrorism, I would argue that Rushdie's conception of terrorism-Islam nexus in *Shalimar the Clown* is hypocrisy for survival.

In the available appreciations of the novel, however, there is hardly any reference to such historicity; instead, the focus of critics has been on other aspects. One of them, for instance, focuses on the setting of novels: it is argued that this novel is the author's nostalgia for another lost paradise. "In his latest novel, *Shalimar the Clown*, the lost Eden is Kashmir, that landlocked sliver of loveliness caught in a bloody geopolitical tug-of-war between Pakistan and India in the aftermath of independence from Britain in 1947" (Joy Press). Another line of argument sees no such nostalgia; rather it sees the setting as the author's adventure – an adventure to present another location and fictionalize the history: "In *Shalimar the Clown* (2005), Salman Rushdie turns to the one remaining thread of his complex cultural inheritance that he has not yet given substantial novelistic treatment: the state of Kashmir" (Teverson). The focus in both the arguments is setting. Another line of critique has focused more on "the story of Max and Boonyi's doomed relationship" and argue that the novel, "can be read as a study in human vanity, selfishness and aggressive mutual need, but also as a parable of the carelessness of American intervention on the subcontinent" (Jonathan). Arguing along the same line, Whipple has viewed the narrative as the author's coming to term with the dynamic reality of the geopolitical and aesthetic space. It is stated that the novel is "a fascinating study of the Kashmiri conflict, the cultures of the area, and the growth of radical Islam, the novel conveys both the spectacular beauty and the spectacular violence of the area, offering much to think about in terms of the origins of such violence".

No doubt, whether the novel is studied by foregrounding its setting or the storyline, we find their prime concern to be territoriality. But, any of these studies hardly take into account a major aspect in Rushdie's life that is related to imposition of Fatwa by Ayatollah Khomeini in 1989 over him. In *Satanic Verses*, Rushdie has presented what Khomeini called "a calculated move aimed at rooting out religion and religiousness, and above all, Islam and its clergy" (cited in Appignanesi 90). As the novel was labeled an 'apostasy', he was condemned to death by Khomeini,

I would like to inform all the intrepid Muslims in the world that the author of the book 'The Satanic Verses', which has been compiled, printed and published in opposition to Islam, the Prophet and the koran, as well as those publishers who were aware of its contents, have been sentenced to death. I call on all zealous Muslims to execute them quickly, wherever they may find them, so that no one will dare to insult the Muslim sanctions. Whoever

is killed on this path will be regarded a martyr, God willing. (qtd. in Lustig et al.)

A \$2.5 million bounty was put on his head, forcing Rushdie to go into hiding. Moreover, Rushdie announced and published apologies, which understandably is a strategy for survival. In one of his announcements, Rushdie said, “As author of *The Satanic Verses*, I recognize that Muslims in many parts of the world are genuinely distressed by the publication of my novel. I profoundly regret the distress that publication has occasioned to sincere followers of Islam” (qtd. in Lohr). In another occasion, he repented for bringing out the book and made decision not to publish a paperback edition of the novel. Moreover, he “renewed his faith in Islam on Christmas Eve and disassociated himself from the anti-Muslim sentiments expressed by characters in his book” (BBC, *Iranian leader upholds Rushdie fatwa*).

Despite these apologies, Rushdie had no any option to go hiding because many attempts of attack targeted him. One planned attack on Rushdie failed when the would-be bomber, Mustafa Mahmoud, blew himself up along with two floors of a central London hotel. And naturally, as per the edict of Khomeini’s Fatwa, the life of people who were involved in publishing of the book and “were aware” of its “contents” was endangered. Hitoshi Igarashi, the Japanese translator of the book, was stabbed to death in July 1991, and many others were made targets of attack. Italian language translator, Ettore Capriolo and William Nygaard, the publisher in Norway, were among others who survived an attempted assassination. It was good that Rushdie could survive unharmed to hear Iranian government's statement about the lifting of fatwa in September 1998. Yet, some fundamentalist Muslim groups declared that a fatwa cannot be lifted.

I argue that the corollary of Fatwa and Rushdie’s apology it in 1989/90 reappears in 2005 and reveals an interesting coincidence with the publication of *Shalimar the Clown*. Khomeini’s fatwa against Rushdie was reaffirmed by Iran’s spiritual leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, in early 2005 in his message to Muslim pilgrims to Mecca, “The day will come when they will punish the apostate Rushdie for his scandalous acts and insults against the Koran and the Prophet (Mohammed)” (qtd. in BBC). With it followed the publication of *Shalimar the Clown*. The novel, like his essay “In Good Faith” and other statements after Khomeini’s Fatwa in 1989, does not attack Islam in the spirit of *Satanic Verses*: there is neither the criticism of recent Muslim political figures such as Ayatollah Ali Khamenei nor the questioning to the authority: *Qur'an* and Prophet Muhammad. The sole instance in the novel describing ‘fundamentally Islam’ is ‘jihadi training camp’. But here too, he is not straightforward as before:

Rushdie remains ambivalent ... in his portrayal of what preciously motivates the men in these camps. ... Indeed we are introduced to only one person, a preacher from the Philippines, who is a sincerely religious Muslim believer and a more or less realistically imagined character. We are shown that some of the fighters in the training camp; and specifically Shalimar the Clown, are there because of their consuming rage, which Rushdie goes to some pains to make clear is in no way a religious or Muslim quality. (Pitkin 261)

A culminating point in the story i.e. where Shalimar assassinates Ophuls, which can be viewed as terrorist attack, is shown to be the case of personal revenge. Moreover, readers find 'poetic justice' in the assassination. In presenting the act as justifiable, Rushdie challenges and constructs alternative discourse to western epistemology of Islam-Terrorism nexus. His intention seems clear: by explicitly castigating western historical specificity about terrorism, he implicitly makes plea again to lift Fatwa. But the novel, as described in the contour of Rushdie's relation to Islam, failed to function as such. In 2007, Fatwa was again reaffirmed. Leading Iranian cleric Hojatoleslam Ahmad Khatami declared, "In Islamic Iran, the revolutionary fatwa issued by Imam Khomeini remains valid and cannot be modified" (qtd. in Kemp). Khatami's statement was followed by Rushdie's reaction in an interview with Pamela Connolly. Responding to her question, why he followed Islam and spoke in favor of the religion, he answered:

It was deranged thinking. I was more off-balance than I ever had been, but you can't imagine the pressure I was under. I simply thought I was making a statement of fellowship. As soon as I said it I felt as if I had ripped my own tongue out. It became the moment I hit rock bottom. I realised that my only survival mechanism was my own integrity. (qtd. in Brooks)

Rushdie's answer is clearly non-pro-Islam. This response in the light of anti western construct of Islam-Terrorism connection in *Shalimar the Clown* shows that he lives in between the guilt for the past (criticizing Islam) and faith in the statements manifested in *Satanic Verses*.

*Shalimar the clown* dramatizes the guilt in the form of resistance to western discourse of terrorism after threat of Islamic fundamentalism. His faith, which is blasphemous for Islam, remains palimpsest here. By foregrounding his guilt, he attempts to appear true to Islam among the Muslim and thus makes an apology to lift Fatwa. But once he knows that there is no such possibility, his anti-Islam mind resurfaces and does not hesitate to claim that he adhered Islam as strategy to escape 'the pressure'.

Rushdie's redefinition of terrorism in the novel cannot be disconnected from the whole story from Khomeini's Fatwa to his response to why he adhered to Islam. The close nexus

compels any reader to conclude that Rushdie's anti-western definition of terrorism in *Shalimar the Clown* is another effort to survive from the Fatwa reaffirmed over him.

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