

## Literature as a function of Aristotelian Catharsis: A Study in relation to *Shame* by Salman Rushdie

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**Abstract:** The Greek term “Catharsis” has two principle meanings: purgation and purification. More specifically, the crux between the two meanings holds the notion of catharsis as a medical purgation of excessive emotions on the one hand, and the ceremonial purification of the body on the other. In more liberal terms, purgation of emotions deals with the physical or non-moral, while the moralistic element of purification of the soul comes in the other. Aristotle’s notion of catharsis was extensively applied to poetry and tragedy, and explored the effects of how spectators’ emotions such as pity and fear are cleansed through characters on stage. The argument of this paper is that the body of Literature, as a whole, is a matrix in which both the writers and the readers or spectators, relentlessly purge their emotions and purify their souls. In other words, the very act of generating a poem, writing a novel or a piece of drama is a metaphor used by the authors, wherein writers dress characters to vent their views, emotions, likes and dislikes. Alternatively, this production purifies their souls. For the reader or the spectator, Literature is more close to the original sense of the word catharsis mentioned on the onset. The aim of this paper is to explore the notion of catharsis providing examples from a selected work of literature, namely Salman Rushdie’s *Shame*.

**Keywords:** Ambivalence, Catharsis, Nation, Sexuality, Violence.

### I. INTRODUCTION

The concept of Aristotelian Catharsis in Western philosophy represents a process of purgation in which the emotions of pity and fear are aroused by tragic circumstances of a play. According to Aristotle, a tragedy (in the sense of a theatrical play) should have amongst other things, “incidents arousing pity and fear; wherewith to accomplish its catharsis of such emotions” [2]. Reflecting on the eons accepted notion, a critical observer would desire for answers to the questions: Why is it *required* to have incidents that arouse pity and fear in a tragedy? Is it only through tragic drama that such emotions can be felt?

In response to the first, Catharsis calls upon the interests of the audience, making it realize the notion as a form of moral purification through which a sense of discipline is placed on the audience’s reaction to pity and fear, or demands of it a sense of intellectual clarity in the aftermath of pity and fear. For the author of a tragedy, incidents that arouse pity and fear could be considered as deliberate artistic placements in the plot that allows the audience to experience these emotions, thereby compelling the tragic character to change, develop and move towards a higher realm of moral purification. Therefore, emotions aroused through Catharsis have several guided intentions, and are not mere haphazard activities.

However, Catharsis seems to demand more philosophical sense of the audience. It is expected to intellectually bind to the emotions in rational thought, without mere passivity and blindness, and come out of the theatrical experience purged; emotionally and intellectually. Extending the notion of

Catharsis beyond the conforms of tragedy, it is possible to suggest that Literature itself on the whole, functions within the scheme of Aristotelian Catharsis, and thus all forms of Literature, including poetry and all varieties of prose, just like tragic theatrical performances to which Aristotelian Catharsis was initially applied, have purgatory effects from both author and spectator / reader perspectives.

It is in this light that this paper attempts to explore the notion of Aristotelian Catharsis in relation to *Shame* by Salman Rushdie, both in terms of author and spectator (herein reader) perspectives. The attempt is to analyze the portrayal of characters, major themes and narrative style in an effort to posit Rushdie's work as a Cathartic effort of Literature, which has said and specific motives for those who live in post-colonial, modern times, amidst ongoing wars and post-war situations.

The paper focuses on a qualitative analysis of Rushdie's *Shame* in relation to Aristotelian Catharsis, and utilizes content analysis of the novel and relevant secondary reading material as research methodology to validate its stances.

## II. THE ANALYSIS: What is *Shame*?

*Shame* is possibly Rushdie's critique on a variety of matters of post-colonial importance: nationalism, the disjunctive ambivalence of the Westernized elite against the post-colonial Eastern "playboy", homelessness, cosmopolitanism, diaspora consciousness, troubled boundaries of gender, caste and class and also of violence (both physical and sexual), all which make the novel an emotional outcry. The primary characters of General Raza Hyder and Iskander Harappa on the one hand and Omar Khayyam Shakil, along with the three mothers and Sufiya Zinobia, his wife, create the almost perfect platform upon which Rushdie evokes the reader's emotions; a juxtaposition of both semi-historical allegory and magical realism. Amidst this setting, *Shame* highlights pity and fear evoked through the narrative and construction of *Shame*, and explores connotative implications on its readership.

It is possible to state that human subjectivity is an articulation of the self in relation to his/her environment. What is crucial and at the heart of an analysis of *Shame* is the sense of belongingness, or rather the lack of it. Rushdie's very narrator in *Shame* hints at an incomplete selfhood when he remarks that "Although I have known Pakistan for a long time, I have never lived there for longer than six months at a stretch...I have learned Pakistan in slices, the same way as I have learned my growing sister...I think what I'm confessing is that, however I choose to write about over-there, I am forced to reflect that world in fragments of broken mirrors...I must reconcile myself to the inevitability of the missing bits" [6].

### 2.1. The post colonial subject

In line with the statement above, Rushdie's stance as post colonial subject and as migrant is therefore condemned to fragmentation and the emotions that are aroused therein the eyes of the reader create pity for the narrator's lack of belongingness and subsequent existential anxiety. Yet, as the narrator tells us, this very fragmentation leads on to an almost unbearable sense of lightness of being: "I, too, know something of this immigrant business. I am an emigrant from one country (India) and a newcomer in two (England, where I live, and Pakistan, to which my family moved against my will).

And I have a theory that the resentments we *mohajirs* engender have something to do with our conquest of the force of gravity. We have performed the act of which all men anciently dream, the thing for which they envy the birds; that is to say, we have flown” [6]. Rushdie further reiterates that the best thing about migrant people is “their hopefulness” and the worst is “the emptiness of one’s luggage” [6]. Such de-rootedness or lack of fixation of the self is effective and apolitical, and captures well one’s position as a subject in post-modern society. The apositioning or “lack of gravity” (in Rushdie’s own words) facilitates the creation of an unconventional questioning subject; one who is capable of perceiving the surrounding flaws and is the hope for change in future through what he/she sees. The author’s voice in *Shame* thus instils a series of questions on the existence of the post-modern self which is revealed cathartically to the reader.

As Rushdie, who has “lost his gravity” or sense of belonging and writes as an immigrant from England about the fragments he perceives of India and Pakistan, so does the “dispossessed” protagonist of the novel, Omar Khayyam Shakil, perceive the world. Belonging to three uneducated, conventional mothers, who obsessively share the shame of his illegitimate birth, Omar’s precise parents are never heard of within the span of the novel. His questionable parentage is a central way in which Rushdie calls the reader’s attention to the illusion of identity. Similarly, Iskander Harappa and Naveed Hyder are also revealed to be of illegitimate parentage. Such destabilization of the stable identity problematizes the notion of the self, and romanticizes it as a basis of authority. Rushdie’s catharsis upon the reader then emphasizes that persons are extremely unreliable, inconsistent and contradictory; a reality in the post modern era.

## 2.2. Omar: The post colonial parallel?

Omar, the chief protagonist, is thus born and sees the world upside down: “Our hero, Omar Khayyam, first drew breath in that improbable mansion which was too large for its rooms to be counted; opened his eyes; and saw, upside down through an open window, the macabre peaks of the Impossible Mountains on the horizon. One – but which? – of his three mothers had picked him up by the ankles, had pummeled the first breath into his lungs...until, still staring at the inverted summits, the baby began to scream” [6].

Omar thus grew in a precisely inverted conventional order, and this misaligned situation right from the very birth in which Rushdie plots Omar instills in the mind of the reader a sense of emotional pity and fear for Omar’s future. The Cathartic effect lingers on with the reader from the moment Omar is born, through his enclosed upbringing in Nishapur, his venture into the real world through the dumb-waiter, and his life ever after, for he does not know what shame is, a fundamental precept behind his very existence. This sense of lingering curiosity instilled in the reader, mingled with emotions of pity and fear for Omar, is definitely Rushdie’s artistic deliberations. By evoking such emotions for Omar, Rushdie questions notions of belongingness, descent, shame and shamelessness, conventionally valued notions for human existence.

## 2.3. The dialectics of shame

Rushdie’s fictional creation of Sufiya Zinobia Hyder, daughter of General Raza Hyder and Bilquis is based on an exemplification of the diverging axis between shame and shamelessness. The central plot line of *Shame* finds Sufiya metamorphosing like Gregor Samsa in Kafka’s *The Metamorphosis*,

into a beast, who then hypnotizes and seduces young men and rips off their heads with super human strength. Though magical, Rushdie's presentation of Sufiya's metamorphosis within *Shame* creates fear and anticipation in the reader, and while highlighting the extent to which transmutation in an individual can occur, it makes the reader question the view of the self as a stable self-contained entity. The instilled interrogation debates the boundaries of the self versus the other, a fundamental human duality, often blurred and unresolved.

Linked with Sufiya's "beastliness" is her uncontrollable blushing "whenever her presence was noticed by others" [6]. Rushdie reiterates that Sufiya also "blushed for the world" [6], the implication being that Sufiya is an epitome of her land's, emphatically Pakistan's, shame.

Blushing according to Rushdie, is a slow burning. He explains it as a psychosomatic event- a sudden shut down of the arterio-venous anastomoses of the face which floods the capillaries with blood that produces the characteristically heightened colour. For those who do not believe in a psychosomatic explanation, Rushdie urges to reflect upon it as a heightened sensibility that can be brought on even by the recollection of an embarrassment of which they have been the subject [6]. The question is why does Rushdie personify Sufiya as an emblem of shame, and what are its implications?

Prior to finding an answer, one must identify Rushdie's work in the light of magical realism. The term magical realism was primarily utilized to refer to George Louis Bogais' whose work adopted Argentinian folk literature [5]. Later on, this notion was used to refer to works of literature by authors such as Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Milan Kundera, Vladimir Nabokov, Issac Bashevis Singer, Salman Rushdie, Gunter Grass and Isabel Allende. Magical realism in the works of these authors refers to the social, political, cultural and humanistic movements concentrated around human spirituality. Moreover, the term is more inclined to define the social mindset just as much as Surrealism is inclined towards defining the personal mindset.

A careful examination of Sufiya's magical realistic characterization and its intents in *Shame* problematizes several social aspects. Having lost his only male heir to the family in his wife's womb, General Hyder, Sufiya's father, a conventional man who believes the eldest in the family should be a son, rages at the reincarnation of the son in a female body with the birth of Sufiya. Sufiya thus is a "shame" in her father's eyes- a born failure. Her birth also instigates a rift between Hyder and his wife, Bilquis, which only aggravates with time, never to be mended. Therefore, the height of emotions generated by Sufiya's transmutation into a beast which devours men, coupled with the over-realistic act of blushing impregnated by Rushdie on his character creates a strong voice on behalf of women in the Q (Pakistan), the personal and social pressures to which the marginal has to go through.

For Omar, the act of having sex with his wife, generally believed to be an act of production or construction rather than of destruction, is subverted, and instantly the rational reader contemplates and feels pity for the subordinate man (Omar) and fears the power of female sexuality. The ultimatum is that the story creates what Samir Dayal refers to as "sexual competition" where there is "fear of the phallic woman's threat to marriage" [3]. The novel itself is also a semi-historical allegory of the birth of Pakistan, its controversial conflicts and General Hyder, the man with "razor guts" who is actually a representation of General Mohammed Zia-ul-Haq, the man who outruns the Bhutto regime in a violent manner.

#### 2.4. The release through Catharsis: Shame and its perceptions

What then does Rushdie pre-suppose through this catharsis? Does the schizophrenic, situational ambivalence he arouses in the reader's mind through Sufiya suggest a pessimistic, misogynist view on marriage? Rather, the subversive element of the catharsis should be understood, wherein Rushdie would want his readers to identify the oppression of women, and the violence that it would instigate within, becoming a "threat" which displaces the male-centric view on the institution of marriage. The use of a woman's image to generate the message is powerful than using a direct male protagonist, and Rushdie being an unorthodox, alternative writer, could not project anything better than Sufiya to move the conventional reader. In addition to questioning notions of sex and destruction, by creating the schizophrenic, beastly-like and blushing Sufiya, Rushdie also arouses the readers' strong emotions to question and blush for what has happened in his semi-imaginary country within the discourse of the assertion of a new nation. Sufiya could well be blushing for the incorrigible past of the allegorical Pakistan, with its problematic expressions of masculinity, and the implied trappings of power and therefore violence; a fundamental existential reality that has to be questioned by today's citizen.

Within this same nationalistic discourse, we find a masculinist projection of the women in the novel: Rani Harappa, Bilquis, "Good News," Arjumand the "Virgin Ironpants," and of course Sufiya Zinobia. This is counter balanced with an emasculation of the chief male characters, who appear to be caricatures or underdeveloped characters- Just as Raza Hyder's career and military background suggest a parallel with Zia ul Haq, Iskander Harappa or Isky in the novel likewise appears to stand in for former Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, who was executed in 1978, while Omar Khayyam Shakil has parallels to a poet who was "never popular in his native Persia; ...he exists in the West in a translation that is really a complete reworking of his verses, in many cases very different from the spirit of the original" [6]. This de-stabilization of the normative figure apprehends the reader in such a cathartic magnitude that the result is none other but to question what Louis Althusser would call the "always-already interpellated subject".

We also have Rushdie's own autobiographical comment projected through the narrator's voice: "I, too, am a translated man. I have been *borne across*. It is generally believed that something is always lost in translation; I cling to the notion- and use, in evidence, the success of Fitzgerald-Khayyam- that something can also be gained" [6]. Such non-traditional, de-stabilized characterization creates an apolitical premise upon which Rushdie can criticize politics, societal norms and values. It creates a sense of insecurity in the minds of the reader, who is troubled with pity and fear and thus seeks answers to problematic expressions of masculinist nationalism, violence and oppression onto women. What does Rushdie want to create through such a de-stabilization of norms via a "translated man"?

Samir Dayal explains that Rushdie here "seems to be asking the unaskable: that men, especially subcontinental men, should reconsider their notions of masculinity and the implied trappings of power and therefore violence. In so doing they might negotiate the boundaries and liminalities between the Orientalist stereotypes of the effeminate Asiatic and the (in some ways more conceptually slippery) stereotypes of Asiatic machismo" [3]. The reader of the novel would then be purged through the realization that the male-Orientalist mindset is not free from the throngs of power in abuse and violence. It is this deconstructive cathartic consciousness that dawns upon the

reader and Rushdie's experiment of emasculation of men and masculinization of women could be termed successful. It also serves the intention of creating a deconstructive force on the workings of the phallogentric nation.

Rushdie as the narrator in *Shame* is not naïve; he is an intrusive narrator, who questions the authority of both narrative and history. When Raza Hyder (Zia ul Haq) plots the overthrow of Iskander Harappa (former Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto) Rushdie intrusively comments "Well, well, I mustn't forget I'm only telling a fairy-story. My dictator will be toppled by goblinish, faery means. 'Makes it pretty easy for you,' is the obvious criticism; and I agree, I agree. But add, even if it does sound a little peevish: 'You try and get rid of a dictator some time.' [6]. Rushdie's voice not only becomes an apology to evade serious criticism and banning of his work by alluring his readership into believing his narrative to be mere fiction, but also creates anxiety in the reader's mind about the very construction of history. By tying fictionality closely with the actual history of Pakistan, Rushdie de-stabilizes, dis-empowers and thus blurs the entire notion of history, for Pakistan's history itself was artificially inseminated after India's independence. Therefore, in *Shame* Rushdie presents at one and the same time, an account of history in its semi-fictional reality, juxtaposed with pure fictional characters. The overwhelming of emotions generated in the reader at this point of displacement creates a diabolic uncertainty, which compels the reader to move out of conventionality and question one's own roots and identity.

Amidst such interpretations of Rushdie as a narrator and an analysis of *Shame*, it is equally important to inquire into the notion of cosmopolitanism in relation to Rushdie and in *Shame*. As exemplified before, Rushdie seems to position his narrative stance "beyond" borders. His semi-fictional land in the novel, the Q., and semi-allegorical references to Pakistan's political history gives him ample space to criticize his "imaginary homeland". Timothy Brennan insists that "Rushdie is a cosmopolitan writer, but in *Shame* (as in *The Moor's Last Sigh*, *Midnight's Children*, and *The Satanic Verses*), Rushdie's ambition is even more to re-imagine and trouble received notions of belonging in nationness or to particular zones - Pakistan or India; London or Bombay - not so much from a cosmopolitan unanchored perspective as much as from within the interstitial spaces of those zones themselves" [3]. Yet, the emotional instability created in the mind of the reader, and thus the cosmopolitan sensibility does not disable and make fragile his characters in *Shame*. Rather, Rushdie purges our emotions, not only making us criticize conventionality, but also making us feel ambivalent even about the notion of cosmopolitanism. The catharsis creates a situational ambivalence, which is both a problem as well as a strength for the purged reader. Moreover, Rushdie makes us feel that the ambivalent state is actually *necessary* to understand a person's cultural location in terms of ethnicity, class, gender and nation.

## 2.5. The functional purpose of Catharsis

Catharsis dawns the human mind into realization. This realization is arrived at by reasoning and by knowledge, and knowledge is valuable. Not only does it enable us to depend on our beliefs, but it also enables us to believe in the beliefs of others. However, knowledge can be misapplied if the end is a bad. There must be what Kant calls 'knowledge of ends', and what Aristotle calls 'virtue'. As Roger Scruton further explains the proposition, "A person may not know what to do or what to feel, and it is in learning what to do and what to feel that we acquire moral competence"[7]. Morality for Aristotle is a matter of character and moral education [7]. He argued that the virtuous person knows what to

feel, according to the demands of the situation- the right emotion, towards the right object and in the right degree. Moral education has such knowledge as its goal. Scruton suggests that this is what should be taught when teaching Humanities. Literature, then has an unsurpassable educative and moralistic motive, and this is precisely what authors such as Rushdie demand through their work from their readership.

It is obligatory to align this discussion and the impact of such a purgation of emotions and re-thinking as a necessity for us today, where we have to develop capacity, cognition and analytical skills in deciphering our complex situational existence in a post-war context. Capacity development in this sense requires us to be aroused with what we read, see and experience and the development of pity and fear for those involved, as characters, should make us realize the subversive elements that work in relation to identity, belongingness, sexuality, nation, violence and situational ambivalence. For Rushdie, his expression in the form of *Shame* is itself cathartic, for through the novel he himself purges his emotions, while purifying readers' souls by opening up their intellect. Though its author is a diasporic Indian, *Shame* expresses the intuition needed for us as Sri Lankans, living in a nation which has experienced two civil uprisings and one ethnic war in the past thirty years, which questions the very fundamentals of human existence and co-habitation. In this sense, *Shame* is truly a timely necessity in modern times.

### III. CONCLUSION

Literary criticism, based on the reading of Literature, is a site of struggle; the numerous ways in which the reader interprets it, alternatively re-interprets society and its manifestations. Hence, it is a political exercise. The most important point as Tony Bennett writes "is not what literature's political effects are but what they might be made to be...by the operations of Marxist criticism" [1]. This "symptomatic reading" [4] if to use Althusser's terminology, is constructive and is the basis for knowledge generation and the making of ideology. *Shame* in this sense, as a work of Literature, produces a political field of cultural practice in its catharsis as this paper highlights, and shows the dialectic of existence of both the exploiter and the exploited, and the intricate ways in which power and dominance is practiced and balanced in society. What is required out of this purgative experience is to "listen" to Rushdie's personal emotions as the narrator, while being objective enough to understand the workings of the individual in the social matrix for a better reading of the post modern subject.

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