

“*The Empire Writes Back*”:
Language and History in “Shame”
and “*Midnight’s Children*”

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I. *Handcuffed to and Fathered by “History as She is Writ”*

To make the preparation of any account a reasonable account [the historian] would have to adopt an attitude towards the available material. The action of such an attitude is rather like that of a sieve. Only what is relevant to such an attitude gets through. The rest gets thrown away. The real relevance and truth of what gets through the mess depends on the relevance and truth of the attitude.

PAUL SCOTT, Robin White in *The Jewel in the Crown*

ONE OF THE most important aspects of Salman Rushdie’s work is the almost excessively self-conscious and playful process by which Saleem Sinai in *Midnight’s Children* and *Shame*’s narrator, through its “protagonist,” Omar Khayam, try to come to terms with their personal and national histories as colonized people. In *Midnight’s Children*, Rushdie and Saleem explore notions of history, time, autobiography, and writing. In *Shame*, the narrator/writer is self-conscious about his position as an Indian writer in English, exploring throughout the novel (with reference to ideas of history and time) his tortured position as a disinherited writer with a double literary inheritance.

Saleem Sinai defines himself by his relation to India’s history. By writing his autobiography he hopes not only to fend off his own inevitable decay and death, but also that of his country. As one of her “midnight children” (195), born at the stroke of midnight on Independence Day, Saleem is India: he is All-India radio, a map of India, the instigator of her fierce language riots. The trials

and tribulations of his body and his family are inextricably entwined with those of his country — the various births, labours and deaths in the book correspond exactly to major events in Indian history: the Jallianwallah Bagh massacre, Independence Day itself, Indira Gandhi's rise to and tenacious hold on power, her Emergency Rule, her trial. But Saleem's relationship to history is not all that simple, despite his constant assertions that he (and the other children of midnight) are "fathered by history" (118), and "handcuffed" to it (9).

As he writes the novel, Saleem wrestles with a chronological view of history, passed on by the ruling British and now part of the Indian national consciousness, and (to him) a more ephemeral, (Mahatma) Gandhian, mythical view of history — properly and traditionally Indian, but suppressed by more "progressive" ideas about history and its relation to time. The first historical model (and "model" is a very apposite term) needs the linear narrative, the act of plotting, to describe its cause-and-effect basis. Far from being objective, this type of history-telling is an act of "remembering forward" in Barthesian terms (White, "Question" 13), of knowing the end result, and linking it retrospectively to its beginning. Historical events then have no immanent structure, but only one imposed by an ideologically conditioned historian. The act of creating histories, then, is an ideological act, designed to support political and moral systems.

An imperialist venture, like that of the British in India, depends on such a traditional view of history for its sustenance. Saleem therefore quite perceptively associates his enslavement to this view of history with his parentage. This idea of lineage is a patriarchal and paternalistic historical concept and Saleem needs to know who his father is: is he British or Indian? Throughout the novel he faces that dilemma and that choice. *Shame's* narrator writes, of Omar Khayam's adoption of Rodrigues as his father (Khayam too doesn't know whether his father is British or Indian), "choose yourself a father and you also choose your inheritance" (49). Is Saleem indeed "fathered" by this chronological, British-born(e) manipulation of history? If he is, he must live with his feeling of impotence, which is also reflected physically, in the face of an oppressive sense of destiny or fate that this mode of history entails.

The impotence of the Nietzschean historical man results from the desire of those in power to control history. According to *Shame's* narrator, this kind of history is passive and "loves to be dominated" (124). Indeed, Saleem's handcuff image not only binds him to history, but equally binds history to Saleem. Joseph Esposito writes that capitalist societies have little need for a true historical sense; rather, they romanticize it in genres such as the historical novel, and are really concerned with "frozen essences and natures" (36). Such a view is vividly evoked in Saleem's description of Indian politicians, who, in their desire for immortality, are "clutching Time in their mummified fingers and refusing to let it move" (327). Only when the British want to leave India does time move again — the sound of clocks ticking reverberates as Independence draws near. A true sense of history, then, gets lost in politically ideological attempts at control. This burial of a real historical sense, according to Roland Barthes in "Myth Today," is necessary for an ideology — in Barthes' terms "myth" is a dominant ideology — to perpetuate itself and continue to exert power (142). Peter Kemp may be describing the early Saleem, and the impulse behind a traditional mode of history, as well as its relationship to existing systems of power:

Thus, the "modern man" who believes in his own historicity is a being who, despite historical finitude, has given birth to the illusion that he can dominate both time and the past by the sheer omnipotence of his thinking, as if there were no radical difference between now and then, between here and there, between the same and other. (94)

By using the romantic literary/historical genre of the historical novel, then, Saleem is, at the beginning of the novel, apparently supporting this conventional or traditional view of history; however, he subverts this view more and more, not only in terms of a change in his thought, but by his trouble with his story's form and structure. He finds himself constantly resisting the urge to linearize, to narrativize in the historians' sense, at the same time as fervently wishing to fulfil his and his nation's "longing for form" (300), and to record for posterity, in writing, the history of this "nation of forgetters" (37), which — because of its domination by others — is, as a nation, "simply run[ning] out of steam" (327).

As Saleem writes, he rearranges events, misremembers dates, and creates causes and effects for “real” events that are utterly fictional (he is himself a fiction after all). *Midnight’s Children* points to the fact that history is a method of fictionalizing experience, as is the telling of lives — biography and autobiography. For Saleem, reality and truth are not quantifiable and not ascertainable. They are constructs of imagination and experience, and of language. For him, the truth of a story lies in its telling and is a reflection of the idiosyncratic process of selecting events from memory:

I say yet again, “Memory’s truth, because memory has its own special kind. It selects, it eliminates, alters, exaggerates, minimizes, glorifies, and vilifies also; but in the end it creates its own reality, its heterogeneous but usually coherent version of events; and no sane human being ever trusts someone else’s version more than his own.” Yes: I said “sane”. (211)

In fact, in *Shame*, the narrator finds the creation of history to be subject to memory as an almost living and independent entity, for he faces “the problem of history: what to retain, what to dump, how to hold on to what memory insists on relinquishing, how to deal with change” (87-88).

What the imposition of an imperialist view of India’s history has done, of course, is to repress the Indians’ version of their own history, based on their own language and culture. Using the language of patrilineage again, Saleem explains what this has done to himself and his country — “he was the child of a father who was not his father; but also the child of a time which damaged reality so badly that nobody ever managed to put it together again” (420). What Saleem attempts by writing the novel is to avoid the confining selective process involved in chronological history-telling, and instead to follow the Indian urge to “encapsulate the whole of reality” (75), to understand lives and nations by “swallow[ing]” them. The gradual change in Saleem’s view of history is signalled in the following passage, in which he reiterates his claim that history-making involves this “swallowing” of lives:

I am the sum total of everything that went before me, of all I have been seen done, of everything done-to-me. I am everyone everything whose being-in-the world affected was affected by mine. I

am anything that happens after I've gone which would not have happened if I had not come. Nor am I particularly exceptional in this matter; each "I", every one of the now-six-hundred-million-plus of us, contains a similar multitude. I repeat for the last time: to understand me, you'll have to swallow a world. (383)

2. *Transcending History and the Body: Gandhi, Foucault, Nietzsche, Sinai*

The insight this had given him into the possibly important part played in Anglo-Indian history by an incipient, intermittent or chronic diarrhoea in the bowels of the *raj* was one of the few definite academic advantages he felt he had gained by coming to India.

PAUL SCOTT, on Guy Perron in *A Division of the Spoils*

Saleem thus begins to come to terms with the role of the first, traditional historical mode, as well as recognizing that beyond lies a much larger, almost mythical, view of history found in Indian philosophy and religion from which the Indian concept of *maya*, or the illusoriness of life, derives, and only foreign sensibilities (or those of the colonized, completely estranged from their original cultures) find it alien, nihilistic, and frightening. For a man like Gandhi, this second mode of historical thinking is essential. For him "that which is permanent eludes the historian of events. Truth transcends history" (quoted in Gokhale 217). What he termed "inner history" could not be seen in terms of dates, events, and quantifiable time, but rather in terms of time "quite different from those of conventional history for they have a larger rhythm and a larger interval; the word used is *Yuga*, an entire age or aeon" (Gokhale 224). Saleem also considers this concept when he argues for a sense of proportion in the telling of stories:

Think of this: history, in my version, entered a new phase on August 15th, 1947 — but in another version, that inescapable date is no more than one fleeting instant in the Age of Darkness, Kali-Yuga [which] . . . began on Friday, February 18th, 3102 B.C.; and will last a mere 432,000 years! Already feeling somewhat dwarfed, I should add nevertheless that the Age of Darkness is only the fourth phase of the present Maha-Yuga cycle which is, in total, ten times as long; and when you consider that it takes a thousand Maha-Yugas to make just one Day of Brahma, you'll see what I mean about proportion. (194)

In this passage, we can see Saleem’s understanding of the transcendental view of history, alongside the mundane concern with accuracy in numbers and dates. In an excellent article on Gandhi’s philosophy of history, Balkrishna Gokhale discusses Franklin Edgerton’s analysis of two strands of Indian philosophy: the interpenetration of the “ordinary” and the “extraordinary” (224). This combination of two levels of thought is what is so disturbing to a Western mind resolutely entrenched in just one, the “ordinary.” These double strands also account for the totally different concept of time which is also essential to a transcendental view of history. With some irritation, Saleem remarks that “no people whose word for ‘yesterday’ is the same as their word for ‘tomorrow’ can be said to have a firm grip on the time” (106), and the narrator in *Shame* also pinpoints this as the central problem in his attempt to narrate the story of Khayam, remarking that “it seems that the future cannot be restrained, and insists on seeping back into the past” (24).

And yet, this view of history, while potentially liberating, is extremely threatening. The impulse to narrate and to create stories is an impulse to order, to make sense of an apparently chaotic world, to create a coherent sense of self. *Midnight’s Children* is about Saleem’s struggle to make himself and his country into a unified subject, to assert his lineage, his family and national ties, and alliances. According to David Carroll, questioning conventional history threatens the very basis of subjectivity:

The uncertainty of the representation of the past (of history and memory) when the origin and end of history are no longer assumed to be present, when the sense or direction of history is in question, cannot simply be dismissed as constituting a subjectivist view of history . . . for it is the subject itself, as an individual or collectivity (type) that depends on teleological views of history for its support. The derivation of the individual subject . . . the subject as unified presence . . . is problematical when history is not accepted in its “domesticated,” rational, metaphysical form as the optimistic resolution of contradictions. (112)

Both Saleem Sinai’s and Omar Khayam’s obsession with place and, in particular, family (the search for lineage, the outlining of ancestry, the adoption if necessary of “foster” family) can also be seen, in Carroll’s terms, as this desire for a unified and coherent

subjectivity. The desire for origin is for Carroll a desire to immortalize and retain the past. The family and the family home are the foci of this desire:

The context of this subject is the family, which defines a structure, an enclosure where the subject takes on an identity and becomes what it is, equal to itself. Memory within this enclosure protects the identity of the subject and is a means of recalling the sense of the subject to itself. . . . The family is one as the subject is one. The family seems to have overcome the problem of the reconstruction of the past by offering a substantial, "natural" context in which the reconstruction can take place. (149)

Clearly, both Khayam and Sinai share this desire to be able to place the family home, family name, and family context. And, just as clearly, their lack of knowledge about their fathers, their very origins, thwarts any such attempts to reconstruct — for themselves, India, or Pakistan — a unified, coherent, sense of self, nationality or ethnicity. Saleem says as much of the personality of Pakistan when he suggests that

at the deep foundations of their unease lay the fear of schizophrenia, of splitting, that was buried like an umbilical cord in every Pakistani heart. In those days, the country's East and West wings were separated by the unbridgeable land-mass of India; but past and present, too, are divided by an unbridgeable gulf. Religion was the glue of Pakistan, holding the halves together; just as consciousness, the awareness of oneself as a homogeneous entity in time, a blend of past and present, is the glue of personality, holding together our then and our now. (351)

It is this dilemma of history that the narrator/Rushdie laments of the Pakistanis in *Shame*. "All migrants leave their pasts behind," he writes; "it is the fate of migrants to be stripped of history" (63). Given that their origins are obscure, and are for all practical purposes non-existent, both Sinai and Khayam have to confront squarely the problem of identity and history. After he has destroyed the objects associated with his childhood, Khayam gazes in dismay at what he describes as his "massacred history" (32). For Saleem Sinai, the impetus is external; when the bulldozer robs him of his silver spittoon, he comments: "[I was] deprived of the last object connecting me to my more tangible, historically-verifiable past" (432). A few pages later, Saleem tiredly admits that he is indeed "no longer connected to history" (442).

Both Khayam and Saleem fear being annihilated from and by history altogether. Khayam is afraid of “never emerging from the disintegrating history of his race” (32), and the amnesiac buddha-Sinai talks of “seceding from history” (351). Both point up the place of and necessity for discontinuity in a historical way of thinking that does not oppress, confine, and rigidify. Both India/Saleem and Pakistan/Khayam are indeed in danger of disappearing entirely from a conventional historical approach. In strikingly Foucauldian terms, Rushdie reveals Khayam, just before his massacre of his history, to be exploring “beyond history into what seemed the positively archaeological antiquity of ‘Nishapur’” (31). In his essay “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” Foucault opposes conventional history to the search for genealogy, or the analysis of descent, which he also shows to be a very disquieting alternative, for “it disturbs what was previously considered immobile; it fragments what was thought unified; it shows the heterogeneity of what was imagined consistent with itself” (147). Foucault adds that “descent attaches itself to the body” (147), a statement again striking in its applicability to *Midnight's Children*. Saleem suffers history through his body. He is concerned always with its decay, which grows more and more rapid as his novel progresses. The history of India, and his own, is dependent on his nose, depleting body parts, his transistor-like head. In *Midnight's Children* the body is, as Foucault describes it,

the pretext of . . . insurmountable conflict . . . the inscribed surface of events (traced by language and dissolved by ideas), the locus of a disassociated Self (adopting the illusion of a substantial unity), and a volume in perpetual disintegration. Genealogy, as an analysis of descent, is thus situated within the articulation of the body and history. Its task is to expose a body totally imprinted by history and the process of history's destruction of the body. (148)

Foucault thus derogates the impulse of traditional history to create a unified subject, its attempt to dominate the past. Using Nietzsche's terms, Foucault prefers an “effective” history, suggesting that “History becomes ‘effective’ to the degree that it introduces discontinuity into our very being” (154). What is liberating, despite the threat of fragmentation and discontinuity, is the fact that such a view of history does not allow humans to hide

behind ideas of destiny, or fate. Here (in spite of some important philosophical differences), Foucault comes closest in his view of history to Gandhi's. Indeed, Gandhi is one of Foucault's "successes of history" — someone who is able to subvert the rules of the dominant group to his own ends. Although Foucault's view of humanity is far more pessimistic than Gandhi's, their views on the history of the human race show remarkable similarities. Foucault writes that "humanity installs each of its violences in a system of rules and this proceeds from domination to domination" (151). In such a system of rules, like traditional history, Gandhi felt that "the spirit of man lay buried under such events as wars and revolutions, empires and domination of one race by another" (Gokhale 217). Yet, in Gandhi's "effective" history, there is room for optimism and relief. He too believes that a sense of fate is crippling. Individuals must recognize that they have, and must exercise, their freedom to make choices. With this freedom comes the ability to confront the self (and recognize its fragmentary nature) and thus to come to terms with a type of history in which "All conflicts will be finally resolved, and history will transcend its own time-bound nature" (Gokhale 223).

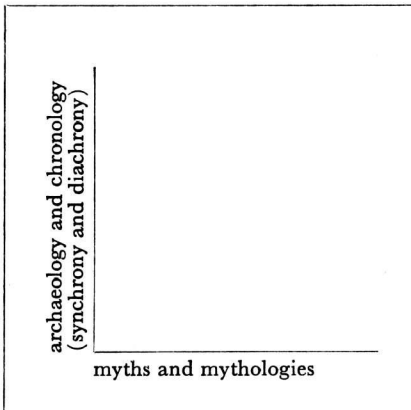
To Gandhi, then, as to Nietzsche (Foucault seems to valorize only genealogy as a pursuit), all modes of historical thinking are necessary, although some are more limiting than others. In *The Use and Abuse of History*, Nietzsche argues for a combination of three modes of historical consciousness — the unhistorical, which comprises the power of "forgetting," of limiting one's horizon (43); the historical, which is what we understand by conventional history — the mode from which Nietzsche feels we suffer an excess (this is the paralyzing "burden of history" which is the source of Saleem's impotence [42]); finally, the superhistorical — a sense that allows for a greater cultural vision, one which encompasses art and religion (43). In this way, Nietzsche hopes to combat the "disguised theology" that traditional history has become (49). In fact, the initial effects of his "remedy" to the ills of the "historical" mode are described by Nietzsche at the end of his short work in terms strikingly similar to Saleem's at the end of *Midnight's Children*. Nietzsche writes:

The unhistorical and the superhistorical are the natural antidotes against the overpowering of life by history; they are the cures for the historical disease. We who are sick of the disease may suffer a little from the antidote. But this is no proof that the treatment we have chosen is wrong. (70)

And this is Saleem:

One day, perhaps, the world may taste the pickles of history. They may be too strong for some palates, their smell may be overpowering, tears may rise to the eyes; I hope nevertheless that it will be possible to say to them that they possess the authentic taste of truth . . . that they are, despite everything, acts of love. (461)

The Gandhian view of history is even more encompassing, however, than Nietzsche’s three modes of history, although the impulse is the same: to free people from stultifying concepts of progress and time. What is striking about Gandhi’s view is its biaxial nature; it is indeed a very similar conceptual model to the structuralist one of synchronic and diachronic historical axes; but in fact subsumes both those indices into one: in Gandhi’s scheme, Foucault’s and Nietzsche’s effective history and three modes of historical consciousness are within the realm of conventional history. Both the synchronic and diachronic, archaeology and chronology, are placed on the vertical axis, while a transcendent concept of history must also encompass, along the horizontal axis, what Gandhi calls myths and mythologies, or fictions.



Gandhi’s view of history: Foucault’s and Nietzsche’s ‘effective’ history are still in this scheme within the realm of conventional history, on the vertical axis. A true and transcendent history must encompass both axes, with each of their component parts.

This model clearly reveals the complexity of historical thinking with which Saleem is attempting to come to terms. By the end of the novel, he comes to accept the uncertainty of the forever-empty pickle jar, and acquiesces to the fact of his (and his country's) disintegration in conventional (bio)historical terms. He has, in fact, managed to see, for all its terror, a larger picture and context, and recognizes a different sense of proportion. Still, his is not the passive acceptance that outsiders see the doctrine of *maya* leading to. Like any good son of the British Empire, he is terrified at the prospect of annihilation:

Yes, they will trample me underfoot, the numbers marching one two three, four hundred million five hundred six, reducing me to specks of voiceless dust, just as, all in good time, they will trample my son who is not my son, and his son who will not be his, and his who will not be his, until the thousand and first generation, until a thousand and one midnights have bestowed their terrible gifts and a thousand and one children have died, because it is the privilege and the curse of midnight's children to be both masters and victims of their times, to forsake privacy and be sucked into the annihilating whirlpool of the multitudes, and to be unable to live or die in peace. (463)

3. "*The Decolonizing of English*"

Hindi, you see, is spare and beautiful. In it we can think thoughts that have the merit of simplicity and truth. And between each other convey these thoughts in correspondingly spare, simple, truthful images. English is not spare. But it is beautiful. It cannot be called truthful because its subtleties are infinite. It is the language of a people who have probably earned their reputation for perfidy and hypocrisy because their language itself is so flexible. . . . At least, this is so when it is written, and the English have usually confided their noblest aspirations to paper.

PAUL SCOTT, Duleep Kumar in *The Jewel in the Crown*

In an article on *Midnight's Children*, Uma Parameswaran employs the phrase "the decolonizing of English" in her assertion that the major mode of the "colonial" writer is irony. The previous section on history showed the intimate connection of writing and language to history. Indian concepts of time are reflected in their language (yesterday is the same as the word for tomorrow), and this language determines their philosophical thinking. The English

language, on the other hand, reinforces and determines the linear, chronological, narrative tendency of a more generally Western philosophy of history. As the language used by imperialists in India, English coloured, displaced, and obscured India's own languages (in part simply because English fulfilled an extremely practical function as a *lingua franca*). Such a pervasive influence could not fail to remain long after Britain granted India independence, and the confusion of the two cultures and their languages can perhaps be most clearly seen in the current state of Indo-Anglian writing (a problematic term for Indian writing in the English language). For, while inheriting a rich literary tradition, Indian writers in English must constantly be aware that they are continuing to displace their own tradition, that they are, to put it bluntly, not only working in, but also valorizing, the language of their (former) colonizers, to the detriment of others.

In *Shame* in particular Rushdie is acutely aware of this split, a sense of schizophrenia in himself as narrator. And, as in *Midnight's Children*, he correlates this to the uneasy political situation and confused historical sense of India and Pakistan. However, with respect to their sense of history, and their consequent construction of a national sense of “self,” Rushdie sees Pakistan and India very differently. He has already commented in *Shame* that Pakistanis suffer from a lack of history as migrants (63). But the creation of their new national history is also problematic:

It is well known that the term “Pakistan”, an acronym, was originally thought up in England by a group of Muslim intellectuals. P for the Punjabis, A for the Afghans, K for the Kashmiris, S for Sind and the “tan”, they say, for Baluchistan. . . . So it was a word born in exile which then went East, was borne-across or translated, and imposed itself on history; a returning migrant, settling down on partitioned land, forming a palimpsest on the past. A palimpsest obscures what lies beneath. 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 rewritten; there was nothing else to be done.

Who commandeered the job of rewriting history? — The immigrants, the *mohajirs*. In what languages? — Urdu and English, both imported tongues. (87)

This artificial construction of history, in foreign languages, cre-

ates for Pakistan even more confusion than that already encountered by India. In *Midnight's Children*, Saleem points out what he perceives to be the fundamental differences in the two countries. India, despite her subjugation, has managed to hold on to a little of her philosophical tradition:

In a country where truth is what it is instructed to be, reality quite literally ceases to exist, so that everything becomes possible except what we are told is the case; and maybe this was the difference between my Indian childhood and Pakistani adolescence — that in the first I was beset by an infinity of alternative realities, while in the second I was adrift, disoriented, amid an equally infinite number of falsenesses, unrealities and lies. (326)

What Rushdie is demonstrating is the necessity for a sense of tradition and continuity in language, history, and politics. Nevertheless, writing is itself double-edged. Saleem Sinai's bodily decay is correlated with the progress of his written novel. The faster, and the more, he writes, the more rapid his decay. Clearly, when the writing is completed, the end of this process can no longer be deferred. By writing his history for posterity, then, Saleem has also ensured his complete disintegration, the prospect with which he leaves us at the end of the novel.

As if recognizing the paradoxical failure of his transcription of history, and his attempt at inscribing himself as subject as well, Saleem also narrates his story to the illiterate Padma. For Rushdie the oral tradition is strong, and is life-affirming. Saleem's attempt to escape linearity in writing cannot be completely successful, and his denigration of Padma's "what-happened-nextism" (39) is both mis- and dis-placed. Padma's discomfort as a listener is not so much at Saleem's failure to provide a linear narrative, but at his evident lack of success in *not* doing so. As a listener, within oral storytelling conventions, she needs a greater sense of continuity than does the reader with the luxury of the printed page. Nevertheless her pleasure at how fast he *can* tell a story doubtless results from its expansive and mythic quality — its evocation of a holistic historical view — rather than its linearity. Implicitly in *Midnight's Children* and much more openly in *Shame*, Rushdie seems to point to a male (and imperialist) weakness — his penchant for valuing the written word above all. It is by telling his story orally that

buddha-Sinai reclaims his forgotten history, and Bilquès Hyder’s storytelling in the novel *Shame* is, like other oral histories, “a rite of blood” (77).

The act of writing does, however, have its value. Carroll finds that its very paradoxical nature is valuable in that it points to its own limitations: “writing . . . is a repeated process of reordering and reinscription from the traces of history and at the same time an assertion of the limitations of any one order or inscription” (137). Later on, he singles out the value of the novel as written form, describing quite accurately what *Midnight’s Children* actually is, an attempt to reach beyond its own circumscribed genre, the historical novel: “The novel must transcend its own language, its own linearity, and constitute a space in which linearity is simply an element” (145). In a form of language which is by its physical nature linear, any written work which tries to thwart its linearity is not going to succeed, but the virtue, it seems, lies in the attempt.

Rushdie always returns, though, to his own dilemma as an Indo-Anglian writer. Some readers have commented that his work is becoming more and more British in idiom and style. In *Shame*, the narrator admits that this may be the case, but concludes that he will never be able to sever his connections with the east:

I tell myself this will be a novel of leavetaking, my last words on the East, from which, many years ago, I began to come loose. I do not always believe myself when I say this. It is part of the world to which, whether I like it or not, I am still joined, if only by elastic bands. (28)

But, although continued writing in another language may indeed divorce a writer even further from the Indian part of her or his literary heritage, Rushdie counters the following objection: “*we know you, with your foreign language wrapped around you like a flag; speaking about us in your forked tongue, what can you tell but lies?*” (28), with this observation: “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 . . . that something can also be gained” (29).

Certainly, Rushdie’s work constantly and consistently jolts its readers into an awareness of their ethno- and linguo-centrism. As

a passing remark, Saleem mentions that none of the dialogue in this novel is in English; he specifically mentions that at one point he is speaking Urdu. Similarly, our assumptions of written linearity as a given are challenged in *Shame*. The Shakil sisters dismiss Khayam's desire to read English out of hand. "'Angrez double-dutch,' said Chhunni-ma, and the three mothers shrugged as one. 'Who is to understand the brains of those crazy types?' asked Munnee-in-the-middle, in tones of final dismissal. 'They read books from left to right'" (36). These recurring acts of reader estrangements serve a political end; they force the reader to question her own ideological assumptions about literature, language and culture, and they are a way of redressing a balance. Although the Indo-Anglian writer is treading a fine line, she can very effectively thumb her nose at the colonizer by using his system and "controlling this complex mechanism [in this case, literature] . . . so as to overcome the rulers through their own rules" (Foucault 151).

This is the sentiment behind Rushdie's delightful title in an article called "The Empire Writes Back with a Vengeance." The so-called colonial writers he writes about are determined to subvert the "myth" (in Barthes' terminology) of literary tradition and canon, to revolutionize the language through (among others) metafictional techniques. What they point to by using the dominant language is Barthes' view that the myth-language of an oppressive group is "rich, multiform, supple" — it eternalizes the world, by relying on intransitive language (149). If "myth" is essentially right wing, then writing is revolutionary and left wing and, to the consternation of the dominant group of mythmakers, extremely committed literature (Barthes 148, 156). To those who are still sceptical about the value of using writing as a political tool, Catherine Belsey cautions that any political struggle has to be verbalized in order to escape being forever marginalized (21). Rushdie echoes this view in *Shame*: "Silence: the ancient language of defeat" (89) serves as a maxim for all of Rushdie's novels. Moreover, Rushdie is not blind to the fact of his own role as political propagandist:

Few mythologies survive close examination, however. And they can become very unpopular indeed if they're rammed down people's

throats. . . . But the ramming-down-the-throat point stands. In the end you get sick of it, you lose faith in the faith, if not *qua* faith then certainly as the basis for a state. And then the dictator falls, and it is discovered that he has brought God down with him, that the justifying myth of the nation has been unmade. This leaves only two options: disintegration, or a new dictatorship. . . . no, there is a third, and I shall not be so pessimistic as to deny its possibility. The third option is the substitution of a new myth for the old one. Here are three such myths, all available from stock at short notice: liberty; equality; fraternity.

I recommend them highly. (*Shame* 251)

Rushdie's novels are intensely political. Like Saleem's, his "Anglopoised" writing is a way of co-opting political and literary power. One of the disturbing things about conflicting historical narratives, according to Louis Mink, is that they displace each other in the reader's mind — they cannot co-exist as literary narratives can. By bringing in the historical, and by forcing readers to confront their notions of both history and fiction, and of the place of commitment in literature, Rushdie is seeing to it that his stories, too, displace more politically acceptable ones. Echoing Mink, *Shame's* narrator says that "every story one chooses to tell is a kind of censorship, it prevents the telling of other tales" (71). The narrator thus puts himself in a position of power — he has the ability to silence, rather than simply remaining silent, and admitting defeat. Rushdie's brand of metafiction is not vainly narcissistic, nor does it fall into the nihilism of linguistic determinism that much "postmodern" fiction does. He recognizes, as Saleem does at the end of *Midnight's Children*, that "life unlike syntax allows one more than three, and at last somewhere the striking of a clock, twelve chimes, release" (463). Having been released from the syntax of the novel, the reader nevertheless is left with the unmistakable taste of pickles and the assurance that Rushdie's novels, for all their complexity and playfulness, are deeply committed "acts of love."

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