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Cosmic Patterns of Creation and Destruction in Salman Rushdie's Shame

Dr. Surender Kumar
Associate Professor in English
Govt. College for Girls Tarori (Karnal)

Abstract

Salman Rushdie's *Shame* (1983) is a remarkable fusion of myth, history, and political allegory that reimagines the destiny of nations through the cosmic lens of creation and destruction. Rooted in the Hindu mythological concept of the cosmic cycle – where Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva symbolize the eternal process of creation, preservation, and annihilation – Rushdie transposes this universal framework onto the political and cultural landscape of Pakistan. The novel transforms myth into metaphor, portraying a nation caught in perpetual cycles of moral decay and political upheaval.

This research paper explores how Rushdie uses the mythic structure of cosmic destruction and renewal to reflect the historical evolution of Pakistan – from its creation as a "pure land" to its fragmentation under the forces of corruption, violence, and repression. Characters such as Iskander Harappa and Raza Hyder embody the conflicting forces of creation and destruction, while female figures like the Shakil sisters, Rani Harappa, and Sufiya Zinobia personify the silenced conscience of the nation. Through their struggles and transformations, Rushdie exposes the failure of political leadership and the suppression of individual freedom, particularly that of women, in a patriarchal society.

The paper argues that *Shame* operates as a modern myth – a narrative that transcends historical realism to articulate universal truths about power, identity, and human fallibility. Rushdie's use of irony, magical realism, and mythic symbolism bridges Eastern metaphysics with postcolonial critique, turning the novel into an allegory of cyclical destruction and moral regeneration. Ultimately, *Shame* reveals that the forces of creation and destruction are not merely cosmic but profoundly human, eternally shaping the fate of individuals and nations alike.

Keywords : Myth, Mythology, Indian, Creation, Destruction, Kali, Mohajirs

The mythology most prominently employed by Rushdie is Hindu mythology. Although he left India more than five decades ago and settled on foreign shores, Rushdie continues to share a deep bond with his homeland. This enduring connection is evident in his fiction, where he repeatedly returns to India through the medium of his novels. His upbringing in India and familiarity with its cultural ethos are reflected in his frequent use of Hindu myths and legends. These myths surface in diverse ways–both explicit and subtle–but the most pervasive theme Rushdie draws upon is the Hindu myth of creation and destruction.

This theme dominates his first three novels–*Grimus*, *Midnight's Children*, and *Shame*–where characters resonate with Hindu mythological figures such as Brahma, Vishnu, Shiva, and Kali, the deities who embody the cosmic cycle of creation and destruction. Rushdie employs this cosmic cycle as an allegorical parallel to the political realities depicted in these works. In *Grimus*, for instance, he critiques the futility of an imaginary political system on Calf Island, whereas in *Midnight's Children* and *Shame* he explores the political and historical upheavals of the Indian subcontinent.

Thus, the process of cosmic creation and destruction in Hindu mythology becomes a metaphor for the rise and fall of political systems in the subcontinent. His characters, ensnared in these struggles, mirror Hindu mythological archetypes that personify the opposing forces of creation and destruction. Central to this metaphor is the Hindu concept of the *Trimurti*–Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva–the divine triad responsible for sustaining the eternal cycle of creation, preservation, and destruction

In this paper, I would like to shed light on the cosmic cycle of creation and destruction as used by Rushdie in Shame. In the novel, Rushdie links this mythological concept to the 20º Century history and politics of the sub-continent, Pakistan to be more specific. Before proceeding let us have a quick glance at the creation and state of affairs in Pakistan as the novel is partially if not wholly based on this country, as Rushdie puts it in Shame:

The country in the story is not Pakistan or not quite. There are two countries real and fictional occupying the same space, or almost the same space. My story, my fictional country exists, like myself, at a slight angle to reality. I have found this off centering to be necessary but its value is, of course, open to debate. My view is that I am not writing only about Pakistan. (29)

Pakistan, a nation that came into existence in the world's map recently-fifty eight years of existence is not a long one-was created by its founders with a vision that it would assimilate Muslims of all regions and sects in itself and thus was named 'Pakistan' where P stood for Punjab is A for Afghanis, K for Kashmiris, S for Sindhis and "TAN' for Baluchistan and thus was referred to as a 'pure' land. 'Pak' in Urdu means pure, but 'Pakistan' which is an acronym had no mention of the East wing. The narrator of Shame says:

It is well known that the term 'Pakistan' an acronym, was originally thought up in England by a group of Muslims intellectuals. P for Punjabis, A for Afghans, K for Kashmiris, S for Sind and "TAN' for Baluchistan. (No mention of the East Wing, you notice; Bangladesh never got its name in the title, and so eventually, it took the hint and seceded from the secessionists (87).

Not just the East wing Pakistanis but the womenfolk and mohajirs (people who opted to

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go from India to Pakistan after the partition), too did not get their due in this 'Pure' land meant for all the Muslims irrespective of their sex, region or sect. Furthermore, a bitter tussle began between the various political and military wings which brought about the downfall of the nation. To portray the conditions prevailing in this fundamentalist society and what could be the possible outcome of it, Rushdie uses the theme of the cosmic cycle of creation and destruction in his novel.

Goonetilleke says of Shame, "Shame is not an exploration of evil but a presentation of an aspect of evil, mainly political evil." (61) However, Rushdie not only presents the political evil of Pakistan but several other evils that crop up owing to it. The rise of fundamentalism, as told above, and the suppression of Pakistan society, especially the plight of the women and that of the mohajirs is well depicted in the novel.

Rushdie in an interview with Haffenden talks about the nature of the closed society in Pakistan. He says:

Karachi is a city that has almost no urban life, because of the repressions of the culture very little happens on the street, and there is a problem with sexual segregation, which makes life odd. I find society in Pakistan very closed, and that closed world is expressed in Shame. (30)

Furthermore, Rushdie foregrounds the repression of women in Pakistan through both direct and indirect depictions of their lives within a closed and patriarchal society. By contrasting their conditions with those of their male counterparts, he exposes the gendered imbalance of power and freedom. In *Shame*, the Shakil sisters–Chhunni, Munnee, and Bunny–stand as stark symbols of the suppression of Pakistani women. Segregated from society and confined within the four walls of their father's home, they embody the plight of women who are denied visibility, autonomy, and participation in the social world. Their confinement to Mr. Shakil's house allegorically mirrors the broader reality of Pakistani society, where women are forced into seclusion. At the same time, the sisters' longing to escape this claustrophobic domestic prison becomes an emblem of the unfulfilled desire of Pakistani women for liberation and self-determination.

The condition of other female characters in the novel is equally deplorable. Rani Harappa and Bilquis Hyder, wives of two powerful political figures–Iskander Harappa and Raza Hyder–are reduced to marginalized roles despite their proximity to the centers of authority. They are denied not only personal freedom but also any participation in the political discourse that so completely consumes their husbands' lives. Through their silenced and powerless existence, Rushdie underscores the structural exclusion of women from political power in Pakistan, suggesting that their oppression is both social and institutional.

Alongside gender repression, *Shame* also engages with another layer of marginalization: the plight of the *mohajirs* (immigrants) in Pakistan. Rushdie highlights their sense of rootlessness and their inability to secure a stable identity or a firm place in society. The hostility and suspicion of the native population towards the *mohajirs* further intensify their alienation, contributing to the atmosphere of unrest and division within the nation. Within the narrative, Iskander Harappa is positioned as a representative of the native elite, while his acts of opposition and humiliation directed at Raza Hyder–a *mohajir*–symbolically represent the antagonism faced by the immigrant community. Through these conflicts, Rushdie not only dramatizes personal rivalries but also

allegorizes the wider social fractures and tensions between natives and *mohajirs*, which continue to destabilize the political and cultural fabric of Pakistan.

The entire process of creation, Rushdie suggests, appears to have gone tragically awry. What was envisioned as the birth of a new nation–a land of purity, freedom, and hope–soon revealed itself to be far removed from the ideals that had inspired its creation. Gradually, the people of Pakistan came to realize that their homeland was not the *"pure land"* they had dreamt of, but rather a fractured state where disillusionment replaced hope. The lofty aspirations and expectations of the general public were systematically dismantled by the constant friction between competing power centers: the political leadership on one side, represented in the novel by Iskander Harappa, and the military establishment on the other, embodied by Raza Hyder.

This relentless tug-of-war between the two power blocs leaves the masses caught in a perpetual state of neglect and suppression. The ordinary citizens, who were meant to be the beneficiaries of independence, instead find themselves marginalized, stripped of agency, and silenced under the weight of political opportunism and authoritarian control. The women in particular bear the brunt of this turmoil, their voices stifled and their freedoms curtailed, making them doubly oppressed–both as citizens of a failing state and as women in a patriarchal society.

In the bomb explodes in the form of Kali, represented by Sufiya and her aides represented by the Shakil sisters. Rushdie uses the Hindu mythological figure of Kali to show us the destruction of the corrupt Pakistani political order. Just as Kali brings about destruction, Sufiya and the Shakil sisters also do the same.

The narrator tells us about the violent aspect of Sufiya similar to Kali when he tells us, 'What now roamed free... was not Sufia Zinobia Shakil at all, but something more like a principle, the embodiment of violence, the pure malevolent strength of the beast. (242)

Zinobia's physical appearance is also similar to the terrifying appearance of Kali who in Hindu mythology is depicted as wearing skulls, dripping with blood and encircled with snakes. The narrator tells the readers that 'Sufiya moved in all fours; naked; coated in mud and blood and shit with twigs sticking to her back and beetles in her chain. (286) Sufiya's link to Kali is made clearer when the narrator tells us that Sufiya kills 'four youth by yoking off their heads which were hurled high sinking into the scattered clouds and nobody saw them fall. (287) Clarke points out to this act as being one performed by Kali. He writes, 'the heads are missing, presumably, because the Kali in Sufiya has taken them with her and has strung them around her neck thus adding more skulls to her necklace. (129) Not only does Sufiya kill other people, she even kills her own husband Omar Khayyam. Sufiya's violence is the result of the anger suppressed within her towards the authorities. It is also an anger of the masses and the womenfolk. The resentment is also towards the Islamic fundamentalism in Pakistan. Clarke says of this:

Rushdie constructs the composite figures of the Beast/Kali. This figure takes on satanic and Hindu associations, which is understandable, given that it revolts against a centralized, monotheistic, patriarchal power that is at once Mosque and State. One might also see the Beast/ Kali as an avatar is that the spirit of Sufiya and

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the innocence and sympathy she represents is repressed, dies and then comes back from the dead in a destructive form which avenges those who kept her spirit down and snuffed it out. (112)

Sufiya may also be seen as Durga-one of the avatars of Kali-who come into existence to free the world of demonic tyranny. According to Hindu mythology, Mahisasur, a demon, conquered the universe and all the gods couldn't hold his immense strength from doing so. Owing to the necessity of cosmic cycle and bringing a change in the hierarchy, Durga came into existence and killed Mahisasur, thus, freeing the world of his tyranny. Similarly, in Shame, Raza Hyder, Maulana Dawood, Omar Khyaam and Iskander may be seen as demons dominating the Pakistani society and it is Sufiya, the Kali or Durga and her avatars that free the nation from their tyranny. Kali is not alone in this process of destruction, she is aided by her avatars in the guise of the Shakil sisters as they bring about the catastrophie end of Raza Hyder. Clarke links the Shakil sisters to the various forms of Kali when he writes:

Three of the main forms of the possessed Sufiya-the Beast, the Kali and Madame Guillotine - can be associated with the three Shakil Sisters: The Beast can be seen in the triune mothers' antagonism to God, in their various acts and in their refusal to perform Islamic rites; Madame Guillotine can be seen in their body-shredding contraption which dispatches the tyrant Raza; and Kali can be seen in their female revolt against the patriarchal and monotheistic power structure central to Islamic cosmology. (121)

Clarke further points out to the parallels between Sufiya and Kali when he write:

Kali status as a female, polytheistic deity makes her a fitting figure of opposition to Raza and his male dominated monotheistic state. Sufiya's initial confinement in the attic indicates repression in general and the oppression of women in particulars. (324)

Clarke further writes of Kali being the symbol of rebellion of the women against the male domination and links her to a Muslim version of a Hindu goddess. He writes:

The more [Sufiya's] father restrains women and female sexuality through his Islamic laws, the more frightening becomes his daughter, who ends as a monster wandering through Pakistan beheading men and drawing out their entrails like a Muslim version of the Hindu goddess. (325)

Sufiya, thus, becomes a Kali to bring the vicious cycle of repression to an end and paves the way for a new political order in Pakistan. Sufiya or Kali's violence is targeted as a cosmic vengeance towards the people who have turned the dream of the common people into a nightmare. Military dictators like Raza Hyder, political leaders like Iskander, fundamentalists like Maulana Dawood and bugs like Omar Khayyam attached to these people must pay the price for failing to live up to the expectations of the masses and crushing them. Sufiya is an incarnation of Kali in as Islamic state to set the chaos in to an order, but before this can be brought about the deity needs some sacrificial blood and this, she finds herself by killing these culprits. Not only does the sacrificial blood calm her down, it also opens the door for the creation of a new political and social order. Furthermore, Sufiya comes with a message for the political, military and religious leaders that if they crush the masses and the womenfolk for their own idiosyncrasies and in the name of religion, a nemesis will be brought about thus bringing an end to the corrupt political and social practices.

To conclude, Rushdie's use of Hindu mythology is not merely an ornamentation to

enhance his writing but it has a deeper meaning. In portraying Sufiya as Kali, Rushdie uses the Hindu figure of the goddess Kali to purify an Islamic society and in doing so Rushdie not only universalizes the myth associated with the goddess Kali but also to portray that we all are the varying manifestations of the same underlying reality.

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