

**Gen'ichiro Itakura**

**“I HAVE BECOME DEATH”:  
*SHALIMAR THE CLOWN* AND THE POST-9/11 ANGLO-AMERICAN  
SENSIBILITIES<sup>1</sup>**

**Introduction**

Salman Rushdie has almost always polarised his readers, and those praises and recriminations often illuminate some aspects of his works and its readers. Responses to *Shalimar the Clown* (2005) point to various desires, both old and new, among his readers that have helped shape our expectations from his works. Like his other novels, *Shalimar the Clown* presents a plethora of controversial topics in a serio-comic, gargantuan mode of writing. Predictably, this style has elicited criticism even from sympathetic reviewers (e.g., King 50; Updike, “Paradise Lost” 152). However, not only have there been many extremely critical voices, but they also criticise its lack of novelty or its failure to meet the

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readers' expectations rather than its sensationalism or extravagant stylistic experimentations. One reviewer goes so far as to say that "*Shalimar the Clown* doesn't only portray a disaster zone; it becomes one" (Kemp par. 9); and another calls it a mere collection of "the great sillinesses that are perpetrated under the name of quality fiction" (Tait 18). The fact that such vehement attacks have been made in quality papers surely warrants a critical attention.<sup>2</sup>

Among all readers of Rushdie, the "upper crest" of Anglo-American readers – reviewers and critics for the mainstream periodicals—now exercise more influence on Rushdie criticism than any other interpretive community, although they are by no means a monolithic entity. Indeed, Rushdie has won a wider readership, greater critical acclaim and more scholarly attention in the West, especially in the United Kingdom, where his career started, and the United States, where he currently resides, than in the East.<sup>3</sup> Being a self-proclaimed

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<sup>2</sup> Therefore it is outside the scope of this study to go into those elements of the novel that have eluded reviewers' attention; but this does not mean these are unimportant. There are, I must add, also a number of more nuanced analyses of the novel than the ones this paper mainly focuses on.

<sup>3</sup> In the past decade, Rushdie has received nearly the same level of academic attention in the Euro-American—mostly Anglophone—world as Lord Byron in terms of the number of

“metropolitan” man, he deliberately targets Anglo-American urban middle-class audiences, but not the English-speaking, “lower-middle-class Muslims of Brick Lane”—his “blind spot, highlighted in *The Satanic Verses* controversy” (Bishnupriya Ghosh 136; cf. Huggan 72). His choice of English and Anglo-American publishers has given his Anglo-American readers enough reason to claim to be his primary targets, whereas his choice of “chutneyfied” or hybridised English, instead of Hindustani or standard British English, implies his “cosmopolitan” intention to represent the increasingly “glocalised” India to the rest of the world. Therefore, his primary targets can be identified with those “middle-” to “highbrow” Anglo-American readers who would like to read about this “glocalised” India. Unlike apparently “lowbrow” readers, they are likely affected by trends in Anglo-American academic writing and the book review circuit.<sup>4</sup>

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academic publications listed in MLA Bibliography (Damrosch 47-49).

<sup>4</sup> Rushdie has recently expressed the importance of writing in English and publishing in the global market (e.g., “Damme, This Is the Oriental Scene for You!” 165)—a move which some critics apprehend may simply accelerate the extermination of minor language literatures, since the criteria for initial evaluation or attention are “determined by the demands of the recipient culture”, and therefore endorse the English-speaking West’s cultural dominance and

This paper will explore how and why readers of Rushdie are divided on *Shalimar the Clown*, with particular focus on its aesthetic and political aspects—its all-embracing style and explicitly political contents—and the roles of Anglo-American reviewers and critics in shaping our view of these aspects of the novel.<sup>5</sup> The first section of the paper will examine the criticisms directed at Rushdie’s “magic realism” in *Shalimar the Clown*, the very technique that elevated him to the status of a literary celebrity. Interestingly, the gap between the canonisation of *Midnight’s Children* (1981), which culminated in the winning of the “Best of Booker” in 2008, and the criticism of *Shalimar the Clown* may point to a certain tendency among Rushdie readers. The second section of the paper will interrogate the critics’ views of political aspects of this novel. As is often suggested, Rushdie’s socio-political observations tend to

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accelerate the ongoing extinction of minor cultures and languages in the name of democratic principles (Mukherjee 2610, 2607).

<sup>5</sup> In this section, I focus on the major Anglo-American publications, though, as J. M. Coetzee claims, Rushdie’s novels usually tap into “local” knowledge—knowledge of something that “only an Indian, and perhaps only an Indian of a certain social background, will appreciate” (15).

encroach on his fictional oeuvre to the point where *Shalimar the Clown* sounds like “a tinny—and poorly executed—echo of observations he has made in the past” (Kakutani, “In Kashmir, Toxic Love Breeds Terrorism” par. 5; cf. Siegel 28). Again, his early “Indian” novels, *Midnight’s Children* and *Shame* (1983), with all their strong political messages, are not only far less frequently criticised on similar grounds but are widely considered as his best. Therefore, contemporary responses to *Shalimar the Clown*—including those severe criticisms cited above—can be read as a mirror held up to contemporary readers of Rushdie rather than the author’s change over the years.

## I

Most critical remarks on magic realism in *Shalimar the Clown* expressed in the mainstream Anglo-American newspapers and magazines are not so much predicated upon the reviewers’ distaste for formal experimentations *per se*, as their perception of the discrepancy between what they expect from a Rushdie novel and what they actually get. Their expectation is, moreover, not purely formal or artistic, partly because magic realism has almost always been

conceived in Europe and North America as privileging marginal voices, especially from the Third World. In other words, they seek whatever they believe to be “non-Western”—exotic landscapes, primitive cultures, strange folkloric monsters, violent massacres, insane tyrants—and thereby ignore the fact that these are deliberately chosen by the author from a repertoire of narrative devices available to him or her. Despite his unarguably central position in the contemporary English literary scene, Rushdie’s works are still determined in some ways by such an “Orientalist” gaze. In his case, “Orientalism” is more apt because of his ethnic origin and the geographical location of his subject matter.<sup>6</sup>

The kind of prose fiction normally categorised under “magic realism” has always been associated with a sense of wonder, “magic”, associated with something “non-Western” and “authentically” primitive. Unlike German “magic realism” (*Magischer Realismus*) of the 1920s,<sup>7</sup> the kind of “magic

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<sup>6</sup> As Edward Said acknowledges in his 1995 “Afterword” to *Orientalism*, the ways of dominating and restructuring referred to as “Orientalism” overlap colonialism elsewhere (352-53).

<sup>7</sup> The term was allegedly coined by Franz Roh to describe a new school of German art circa

realism” that has been popularised since the “Boom” of Latin American literature in the 1950s can be defined as a realistic mode of writing employed to portray supernatural occurrences “unaccountable by rational science” as “part of everyday reality” (Bowers 2, 20-21, 27). The term allegedly originated in *lo real maravilloso* (the marvellous real) in Alejo Carpentier’s preface to his own *El Reino de este Mundo* (*The Kingdom of the World*, 1949), which was apparently envisaged as a political manifesto to distance himself from European surrealism, which he dismisses as “*embustera*” (deceitful) or artificial (Carpentier 5-6; Connell 96), and declare the independence of a new American school of art based on the “*maravilloso*” (marvellous) of America, the “*virginidad del paisaje*” (virginity of landscape) filled with “*mitologías*” (mythologies), which the locals believe but Carpentier himself does not (Carpentier 5-6, 11). Carpentier separates magic realism from surrealism only according to the subject matter or its unfamiliarity, newness or “authentic” primitivism to the “Western” eye, although, as Liam Connell demonstrates—and

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1925, a “cold cerebral approach” to the mystery of life; but it has been suggested that he gave no clear-cut definition of the term and felt ambivalent about using it (Guenther 34-35).

as Rushdie himself observes in an interview—the popular definition of magic realism is not far from that of any kind of fantastic literature, except that magic realism occurs in the “non-West”, especially in Latin America (Connell 99-101; Meer 111).<sup>8</sup> Carpentier’s perspective is so Eurocentric that he totally effaces apparent cultural differences within Spanish America, pigeonholing it into a myth of primitivism and endorsing its stereotypes prevalent in Europe and North America (Connell 96-97; Durix 105).<sup>9</sup> In this respect, European and North American views of magic realism have always been “Orientalist” in nature and the “Boom” was, viewed with hindsight, quite close to what Graham Huggan would term the commodification of “postcoloniality” or packaged “otherness” (Durix 6; Connell 96; Huggan 4-8).

Interestingly, Anglo-American critics of *Shalimar the Clown*’s magic realism

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<sup>8</sup> The same point is often made in the debate on the difference between fantasy and magic realism. Brian Attebery, for instance, points to the then mainstream critics’ tendency not to describe fantastic writing by writers from Asia and South America as “fantasy”, and the underlying assumption of their primitivism or inability even to distinguish the real and the fantastic (7).

<sup>9</sup> For a contrasting view, see Bowers 36-37.

are generally more vocal in regard to characters of at least partly European or North American origins and its Los Angeles scenes, which make up only about one quarter in length of the 398-page novel,<sup>10</sup> and often ascribe Rushdie's "failure" to his ignorance of North American life (e.g. Tait 18).<sup>11</sup> Max Ophuls and his half-Indian daughter India are considered too unrealistically glamorous, being "described in breathless superlatives" (Roth 19), and Olga Simeonovna, the "last surviving descendant of the legendary potato witches of Astrakhan" (Rushdie, *Shalimar the Clown* 9), is duly dismissed as clumsy and cartoonish (Roth 20; Siegel 30), whilst most critics chose not to focus their critical scrutiny on the stereotypically oversexed Bhoomi "Boonyi" Kaul, the rather one-dimensional jealousy-driven Noman Sher Noman (a.k.a. "Shalimar the Clown") and the supernaturally ill-stricken Colonel Hammirdev Suryavans

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<sup>10</sup> Lyon, for instance, unambiguously states that the American sections are weak (par. 9), and Roth contrasts them to the "vivid, not always realistic" episodes set in Kashmir (20). Indeed, none of the reviewers cited in the bibliography praise Rushdie for the novel's American chapters, regardless of their political stance.

<sup>11</sup> The fiercest and most oft-cited critic of Rushdie's "American" writings is arguably James Wood, who cites passages from *Fury* and calls them "completely untrue" and "cartoonish" (217, 219).

Kachhwaha with his changing senses (Rushdie, *Shalimar the Clown* 100, 121-22).

I am not suggesting that the Los Angeles sections of the book are composed as exquisitely as the delightful episodes of Aadam Aziz's past in *Midnight's Children*. Indeed, what has been perceived as Rushdie's weaknesses is clearly visible in those pages. Rushdie's American scenes resemble "the slick, swift virtual reality of a video game or TV commercial", and this Baudrillardian observation now seems "trite" (Mishra 10, Lyon par. 9). India's physical beauty and martial arts training, for instance, evoke a sexy female warrior type prevalent in Anglo-American popular culture, ranging from Bond girls and Charlie's Angels to Edios Interactive's Lara Croft and Disney's stereotypically Chinese-looking Mulan (cf. Lyon par. 9). As is often suggested, the finale, "complete with blades, arrows and night-vision goggles", gives a more than passing nod to the film version of *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991), with two significant twists to the movie: the night-vision goggles are this time on the eyes of the heroine, not the psychopath; and all this takes place at her security-controlled house, not the shoddy basement of the killer's house (Tait

18; Updike, “Paradise Lost” 155; Rushdie, *Shalimar the Clown* 397-98). Shalimar’s sudden prison break is far less eerie than Dr Hannibal’s or far less realistic than those in the *Prison Break* series; it is simply a bad example of *deus ex machina*—or *daemon ex machina*, to be more precise. His description of Olga as being “as broad of mind as she [is] of behind” is nothing but a vulgar sizeist joke (30; cf. Siegel 30), and her “potato magic” an unimaginative amalgamation of two stereotypes: Russian—or East European—backwardness and female irrationality.

It is important to note that deliberate cartoonishness is often employed to produce certain literary effects and can be seen in Rushdie’s more favourably received works. Cartoonish details and pop-cultural references could help create an ontological disjuncture and thus a new fictional world order by deliberately constraining what Brian McHale calls “realemes”—the repertoires of objects and properties considered realistic or “admissible” in particular genres—as do Thomas Pynchon’s pop-cultural references and cartoon-modelled episodes in *Vineland* (1990) (*Constructing Postmodernism* 135-36).<sup>12</sup> Indeed,

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<sup>12</sup> In *Postmodernist Fiction*, McHale uses this term to describe common techniques adopted

Rushdie's earlier novels have been associated with this sort of literary acrobatics. In *The Satanic Verses*, for instance, Saladin Chamcha's portrayal of "Maxim Alien" for "*The Aliens Show*" (62), which can be called "unrealistic" or "cartoonish", brings a subversive—both "postmodern" and "postcolonial"—aesthetics into play. This episode foreshadows later scenes which constitute a witty vignette of the increasingly multicultural yet still racist Britain, where immigrants are still perceived as mutants (157, 168; cf. Ball 149-50). It also underlines the role of television in postcolonial as well as postmodern society. Later in the novel, Chamcha is engaged with "channel-hopping", watching half-heartedly bits and pieces from TV programmes, including *Dr Who*, whose world is peopled by apparently "crossbred" "bizarre creatures"—a metaphor for immigrants in Britain (405). All this points to the governing metaphor of the novel's postmodernist textual poetics as well as the fragmented nature of the late-capitalist Britain (McHale, *Constructing Postmodernism* 132-33).

The kind of "magic realism" in his Indian chapters is not fundamentally

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in postmodernist historical novels (86). However, he extends this discussion on "admissibility" and literary genres to postmodern slipstream or genre crossover.

different from that in the American chapters. The worldly-wise William Tillerman defends Shalimar on the grounds that his client “believes” in witchcraft, although most likely none of these Americans “here in this courtroom” do. Therefore, the defendant’s “extreme vulnerability to external manipulation” makes him “[a] Manchurian Candidate, [. . .] a death zombie, programmed to kill” (Rushdie, *Shalimar the Clown* 383; ellipsis added). Here Tillerman exploits the jury’s prejudice regarding Indians’ backwardness and fear of “brainwashing”, firmly convinced that justice is simply a matter of presentation skills and populist appeal. Even the least informed readers have learned earlier in the novel that Shalimar is by no means vulnerable to mysticism and that many Indians are enlightened enough to consider magic scientifically, just like West Europeans and North Americans (77). Thus this “witchcraft” defence is clearly meant to caricature certain aspects of American society. Yet the glimmer of irony is marred by the presence of those Indian characters who actually believe in the supernatural and the suggested possibility of supernatural occurrences in India. Nazarébaddoor’s ghost does appear both in the locals’ dreams and in reality, and interferes with local affairs when the

need arises (123). Though in madness, Boonyi claims that she lives with her mother Pamposh's ghost, which now looks as young as she because ghosts do not age (238). Like Shalimar, India is capable of telepathic communication; and as it is clearly not a hereditary trait (her father is Max, who does not possess any psionic abilities), it can be attributed to her part Kashmiri origin. After Kachhwaha's death by snakebite, the rumour swiftly mushrooms out of realistic proportion:

It was said, and soon came to be commonly believed, that the snakes had burrowed their way beneath all the army's defences—and these were giant snakes, remember, the most poisonous snakes imaginable, snakes arriving after a long subterranean journey from their secret lairs at the roots of the Himalayas!—to avenge the wrongs against Kashmir, and, people told one another, when General Kachhwaha's body was discovered it looked like he had been attacked by a swarm of hornets, so many and so vicious were the bites. It was not widely known, however, that as she died Firdaus Noman of Pachigam had called down a snake curse upon the army's head; accordingly, this macabre detail was not a part of the story that did the rounds. (316-17)

This typically Rushdiesque episode points to the locals' penchant for gossip and tall tales (85) and readiness to believe the supernatural account of a mysterious event; they would have believed in the "snake curse" theory had she

not completely retreated into herself—even unable to recognise her husband—when she started brooding about “mysteries of life” and seeing snake omens (280). Again, these “magic realist” anecdotes *per se* are admissible in the generic convention of his writing, i.e., in the convention of “literature of the marvellous” or “magic realism”. Like García Márquez’s Macondo, Rushdie’s Pachigam constitutes a fictional topos of alternative reality and history, complete with a hint of nostalgia for the preindustrial past inhabited by simple but quintessentially good people (cf. Bowers 39). Juxtaposed with the “witchcraft defence”, however, these “magical” elements cease to fascinate the reader and begin to reveal the underlying Orientalist gaze on the Third-World backwardness. In this respect, Rushdie is not so remote from Tillerman as one might expect.

Many of the critics of this novel, regardless of their political stance or aesthetic preference, dwell on citing specific examples of Rushdie’s “unrealistic” portrayal of Los Angeles, but somehow remain reticent about potentially more Orientalist episodes in the Indian chapters. This sort of critical practice rests precariously upon two misguided assumptions: that life in a particular place can

only be realistically re-created by its long-time residents or those ethnically affiliated with the place; and that all novels, regardless of their generic diversity, should be evaluated solely based on a naïve understanding of realism, i.e., according to the correspondence between a fictional world and the perceived reality. Tait, for instance, criticises the novel for both its cartoonish representation of American life and its slapdash treatment of the issue of global terrorism, and goes on to reiterate the “old advice” that writers should “[write] what [they] know” (18). Exegesis of this kind, when placed side by side with much public praise for the author of *Midnight’s Children* and *Shame* as a new voice from the Third World and witness to local inequalities, makes itself strangely complicit with superficial literary essentialism. It is important here to remember that the India of *Midnight’s Children* and the Pakistan of *Shame* are both heavily fictionalised, replete with factual inaccuracies, which Rushdie openly admitted (“Errata”), and elements of the marvellous, as if to exemplify his lasting interest in “[fantasy], or the mingling of fantasy and naturalism” as a mode of writing in which a writer can provide a “stereoscopic vision” (“Imaginary Homelands” 19; cf. “Influence” 71) or his inclination towards the

Menippean satire, which is, according to Bakhtin, “not fettered by demands for an external verisimilitude to life” (114; cf. Ball 119-20).<sup>13</sup> With or without any authentic, direct experience, Rushdie always attempts to create a deliberately stylised, often alternate world in which the perceived reality is not the only reality. Besides, as semiology and recent literary criticism have shown us, literary realism is a matter of the “effect” of reality rather than a faithful reflection of reality—whatever it is—since realist writings merely produce a culturally bound illusion of reality through operating various codes within the “tyrannical constraints” of “aesthetic verisimilitude” (Barthes, “The Reality Effect” 144; cf. *S/Z* 16-20; Potter 68-69, 74).

This odd combination of disparagement of the deliberate campiness of the novel’s American chapters and silence about that of the Indian chapters therefore reveals an ill-concealed desire to cast Rushdie as an Indian writer—or more precisely, an Indian writer for Anglo-American readers—and disqualify him as an American writer. This trend is reinforced not only by a certain

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<sup>13</sup> Needless to say, even *Midnight’s Children*, his most critically acclaimed novel, has been criticised for its Orientalist nature (e.g. Huggan 72).

long-standing tendency in Rushdie criticism to label him as a “cosmopolitan”, “migrant”, “postcolonial” and “Third World writer” (Huggan 85), but also by the resurgence of a more naïve, essentialist view of culture founded upon a widespread belief in the “clash of civilisations”. Despite his mainstream position in the contemporary Anglo-American literary scene, Rushdie is still expected to perform what Huggan calls “staged marginality” (87), but not to lay claim to America, other people’s property. This case is reminiscent of another post 9/11 novel, Updike’s *Terrorist* (2006), which has been generally favourably received but criticised for his subject matter. Although the novel has been favourably reviewed, Updike’s portrayal of a young boy of partly Egyptian origin who becomes a “home-grown” terrorist has invited an accusation of implausibility that supposedly stems from the author’s lack of first-hand knowledge or experience or simply his prejudice against a certain ethnic and generational group of people (Amitav Ghosh par. 9; Kakutani, “John Updike’s *Terrorist* Imagines a Homegrown Threat to Homeland Security” par. 4; cf. Jones par. 13). This type of response would never have been directed to either of these two writers, had their subject matter corresponded with their nationality or

ethnic backgrounds. It is this desire for rather naïve literary essentialism, rather than anything unique or intrinsic to *Shalimar the Clown*, that has contributed to the criticism of the novel's magic realism.

## II

Political readings of Rushdie are equally affected by the perceived gap between the Anglo-American readers' expectations of Rushdie, or more precisely, his political roles and/or position in the political spectrum, and his work. This gap has always existed, since he is widely recognised as a "political" writer but he calls himself just a "funny" writer (Jeffries 6). Whilst Christopher Hitchens lavishly praised *Shalimar the Clown* for its political significance, many others have dismissed the novel's social comments as superficial. These views, both positive and negative, respond to the changing public image of Rushdie rather than the novel which is supposed to be "funny". His public image has undergone a tripartite transformation: (1) a witness to

social inequalities in the Third World; (2) the sufferer and survivor of the *fatwa*; and (3) a passionate spokesman for the First World. While the first shift affected the reception of his works in the Middle East and South Asia dramatically (Said, *Culture and Imperialism* 373),<sup>14</sup> the second changed the course of Rushdie criticism in Europe and North America, especially in the United Kingdom and the United States. It has been suggested that around “the event of September 11, 2001”, Rushdie took a sharp political turn from his earlier “recognizable liberal-left position” to the one “surprisingly indistinguishable” from the US mainstream media’s rather uncritical acceptance of the Bush administration’s foreign policy and prevalent stereotypes about Islam (Sawhney and Sawhney 433, 434-35). Just before the 9/11 terror attacks, Graham Huggan wrote, “Rushdie and Naipaul, it need hardly be said, have very different ideological outlooks” (85), whilst, in 2007, Brouillette remarked that

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<sup>14</sup> Said only refers to the regions as the “East”, but this would dishonestly efface the differences within “East”. The regions he mentions had been long referred to as “Western Regions” in Chinese and Japanese (“Xi-yo” and “Sai-iki” respectively) due to ethnic, religious, socio-cultural differences between these “Western”, mostly Islamic countries and the “Eastern” nations influenced by secular “*Mahāyāna*” Buddhism and Confucianism.

“Rushdie [had] inched dangerously closer to Naipaul’s position (87).

Rushdie’s rightward shift has perplexed a certain group of Anglo-American reviewers and critics who have shaped Rushdie criticism—with notable exceptions including Hitchens—because it is not the Rushdie they have admired.<sup>15</sup> Written from a similar political standpoint to *Fury* (2001) and *The Ground Beneath Her Feet* (1999), *Shalimar the Clown* is already bound to attract criticism, with or without its numerous authorial comments on the political, social and cultural conditions of the USA, Alsace and Kashmir.

Rushdie’s works have long been aligned with or considered in relation to particular anti-establishment aesthetics and political resistance. The labelling of Rushdie as a “magic realist” on account of his techniques, exotic landscapes and portrayures of “non-Western” despotic states does not only contribute to consolidating the Euro-American stereotype about “non-Western” forms of political organisation (Connell 100); but it also helps to obliterate his Anglicised,

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<sup>15</sup> Rushdie’s “volte-face” has demanded what Sawhney and Sawhney call a “sudden onrush of doubt” about the Euro-American recognition of Rushdie as an important anti-colonialist/postcolonial writer (435).

upper-middle-class upbringings, far removed from those oppressed people the middle-classes in Europe and North America lavish sympathy on (Huggan 86). Another popular label, “postcolonial writer”, is also misleading. In *Culture and Imperialism*, for instance, Said pictures Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* in league with “resistance writing”, detecting in it the tenets of postcolonialism or at least a kind of artistic “resistance”, an “alternative way of conceiving human history” (260-61). Even after his “volte-face”, Rushdie is evaluated in a similar vein. Andrew Teverson dismisses Aijaz Ahmad and Timothy Brennan, the two who he believes are representative critics of Rushdie, as old-school Marxists, and yet associates him with Said and Homi Bhabha—those intellectual giants whose political positions are generally acknowledged as somewhere between liberal-left and left-wing (27-28). Although in South Asia in particular, he has been criticised by many for pandering to the Euro-American tastes and therefore not considered as an epitome of anti-establishment ethos (Sawhney and Sawhney 435), Rushdie has been lauded in Europe and North America for the healthily anti-establishment, postmodernist and/or postcolonialist “resistance” he is supposedly undertaking.

While Rushdie is expected to provide an “alternative”, anti-establishment way, the Rushdie of *Shalimar the Clown* does not—nor does he intend to—satisfy this demand. Above all, his repeated Op-Ed style comment on globalisation, which can be summed up as “Everywhere [is] now a part of everywhere else” or “Everywhere [is] a mirror of everywhere else” (37, 355), has attracted much criticism (Kakutani, “In Kashmir, Toxic Love Breeds Terrorism” par. 5; Mishra 11; Roth 20; Siegel 28; Tait 17; Walter par. 9). Rushdie’s critics interrogate the validity of his observations in relation to the actual geopolitical conditions of the regions mentioned. Indeed, as Kakutani remarks, readers would rightly express their disbelief because the contemporary Los Angeles, the wartime Strasbourg and the war-torn Kashmir have very little in common. But it is more important to examine why this particular “alternative way” of looking at modern history and geopolitics has irritated so many readers. While India Ophuls is boarding the aeroplane to India, Rushdie steps in to insert an authorial comment:

Everywhere was a mirror of everywhere else. Executions, police

brutality, explosions, riots: Los Angeles was beginning to look like wartime Strasbourg; like Kashmir. Eight days after Harris's execution, when India Ophuls a.k.a. Kashmira Noman flew out of LAX, heading east, the jury returned its verdict in the trial of the four officers accused of the beating of Rodney King in the San Fernando Valley Foothill Police Division, a beating so savage that the amateur videotape of it looked, to many people, like something from Tienanmen Square or Soweto. When the King jury found the policemen not guilty, the city exploded, giving its verdict on the verdict by setting itself on fire, like a suicide bomber, like Jan Palach. Below India's rising aircraft drivers were being pulled from their cars and chased and beaten by men holding rocks. The motionless body of a man called Reginald Denny was being savagely beaten. A huge piece of cinder block was thrown at his head by a man who did a war dance of celebration and made a gang sign at the sky, taunting the news helicopters and airline passengers up there, maybe even taunting God. (355-56)

Connecting different historical events with different socio-political significance, as well as mixing them with fictional events, is certainly a typically "postmodernist" technique to undermine the well-accepted viewpoint and provide an "alternative" way of seeing. However, Rushdie chooses not to provide any "alternative" narrative that would help the reader reach a better understanding of any of those historical incidents or the "systems" that has engendered the nightmare of contemporary life. Instead, he stays superficial as

if to imitate the equally superficial media to the point where his passage becomes an indirect critique of it. Rushdie's reduces all the historical incidents cited in the above quote to a series of video images of violence, effacing the differences between these events or their contexts. The rather single-minded emphasis on the violent nature of the Los Angeles riots of 1992 endorses a simple interpretation that they are mentioned simply because they are "on fire". This sort of dehistoricisation, as well as an editing technique such as graphic match, produces a TV-like effect: the reader may well feel as if watching a variety of video footage of different incidents on the television. This view is confirmed by the author's choice not to express "anti-establishment" or "liberal-left" ethos but to consolidate the established viewpoint of the Euro-American mainstream media. Marco Roth goes far beyond commenting on Rushdie's reductionism; he moves on to criticise him for taking the side of Euro-American "aestheticizer" of violence, for not exploring "crossing points between Western civilization which aestheticizes violence and Islamic civilizations which sanctify it" (20). However, Rushdie probably chooses to appropriate this sort of reductionism or this aestheticisation of violence. Read

alongside this passage, Rushdie's description of violence including the brutal treatment of Anees Noman's dead body, for instance, reveals its resemblance to the recent mainstream media in the post-9/11 decade: it presents not only images of trauma, but also images designed to traumatise us (Rushdie, *Shalimar the Clown* 307; Mitchell 195).

Interestingly, Rushdie possibly deliberately plays with his readers' expectations. The sudden boom of Middle Eastern and South Asian writers' memoirs among Anglo-American readers in the early 2000s, spurred by the success of Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran* (2003), clearly points to the Anglo-American market demand for this "witness" narrative of a terrorist state with enough "insider" tone (Keshavarz 3). Though Rushdie is not from a "rogue" state, *Shalimar the Clown*, a self-consciously post-9/11 novel, is naturally expected to provide the psyche of a terrorist or the origins of global Islamist terrorism (e.g. Roth 19), not the kind of superficiality that might have been lauded in the late 1980s and early 1990s.<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, Rushdie offers

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<sup>16</sup> For Rushdie's "insider" status or the readers' expectation of his role as an "insider" of Islam and witness to Islamists' wrongs, see Almond (67).

sketchy portraits of psychopaths, ranging from Shalimar, the jealousy-driven acrobat turned assassin, and the Gegroos, the rapist brothers, none of whom have any psychological depth. India Ophuls somehow manages to overhear, by way of psionics, Shalimar's threatening words with a mock philosophical tone:

He said: *Everything I do prepares me for you and for him. Every blow I strike, strikes you or him. The people leading us up here are fighting for God or for Pakistan but I am killing because it is what I have become. I have become death.* (298)

On this, Christopher Hitchens comments:

That last line is easily recognizable from another Indian epic, the *Bhagavad Gita*—"I am become death: the shatterer of worlds." These, as I recall, were the very words mouthed by Robert Oppenheimer as he saw the flash and felt the fire at Alamogordo. (126)

Hitchens goes on to call it a "fusion of the psychopathic and the apocalyptic—surely the essence of 'terror' in our time", apparently convinced that Shalimar

and *Bhagavadgītā* represent the “psychopathic” and the “apocalyptic” respectively (Hitchens 126). This is a typically Anglo-American response to the passage. The phrase “I am become death” is the one which is believed—and documented—to have been mouthed by Robert Oppenheimer, but it cannot be found in *Bhagavadgītā*.<sup>17</sup> In *Bhagavadgītā* 11:32, the Supreme Lord tells a woe-stricken prince that he is “time” (*kālā*), not “death”, as “’smi” (*asmi*) denotes the present tense, not the present perfect.<sup>18</sup> Despite its relative

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<sup>17</sup> For a thorough discussion of Oppenheimer’s alleged statement and its publication history, see Hijiya 123-24.

<sup>18</sup> The Supreme Lord Krishna in disguise tells the woe-stricken Arjuna:

श्रीभगवानुवाच ।

कालोऽसि लोकक्षयकृत्प्रवृद्धो  
लोकान्समाहर्तुमिह प्रवृत्तः ।  
ऋतेऽपि त्वां न भविष्यन्ति सर्वे  
येऽवस्थिताः प्रत्यनीकेषु योधाः ॥३२॥

*śrī bhagavān uvāca*

*kālo ’smi loka-kṣaya-kṛt pravṛddho*

*lokān samāhartum iha pravṛttaḥ*

*rte ’pi tvāṁ na bhaviṣyanti sarve*

*ye ’vasthitāḥ pratyānīkeṣu yodhāḥ*

(Prabhupāda 563)

This can be translated as:

ambiguity, the Lord Krishna obviously does not sanction a jealousy-driven man's desire to murder a person.<sup>19</sup> Besides, the passage of time or “Kal” is apparently associated in this novel with the time a fallen woman has to endure as an outcast (227), as if to make sure that even the most knowledgeable readers can ascribe Shalimar's tragedy to jealousy or lust, not Karma or reincarnation.

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The Blessed Lord said:

Time am I, destroyer of the worlds, and I have come to engage all people.

With the exception of you, all the soldiers here on both sides will be slain.

(Prabhupāda 563)

There is another standardised interpretation: Radhakrishnan takes “*ṛte api tvām*” as a concessive phrase “even without thee (thy action)” (279), whereas many English translators have considered it to denote the exception (e.g. Besant 74; Schlegel appendix xxiii; Wilkins 57).

<sup>19</sup> With all multiple meanings of the word “*kālā*”, the Lord Krishna's remark is apparently irrelevant to Shalimar. The translation of *kālā* as “death” has rarely been adopted by English translators and is acceptable only in the sense that the passage of a vast expanse of time brings about a perpetual cycle of birth and death, creation and destruction. Hijjiya compares a number of English versions of the phrase and points to the peculiarity of the translation by Arthur W. Ryder, who was Oppenheimer's teacher of Sanskrit (132; cf. Easwaran 148-49). Krishna's declaration does not carry any “apocalyptic” implications, since every living being is reincarnated and therefore it does not involve a fear for the final destruction of this world—the destruction is not considered negatively (cf. Radhakrishnan 280)—or a belief in the arrival of a millennial kingdom. Despite the famous Gandhian pacifist reading of the text, interpretations of *Gītā* as an excuse for an active military action did exist among both the 1920s Indian nationalists and Third-Reich German Indologists such as J. W. Hauer (Sharpe 126, 128-32).

Rushdie deliberately chooses to add a melodramatic touch to the phrase which, because of its resemblance to Oppenheimer's phrase and the author's ethnic origin, many readers in Europe and North America would likely attribute to *Bhagavadgītā*. This sort of postmodern playfulness is sharply contrasted with Anglo-American readers' expectations of post-9/11 "insider" narrative.

Criticism of *Shalimar the Clown* for the shallowness of its political observation is rather irrelevant, because Rushdie adopts deliberate reductionism and playful irreverence to socially constructed meanings and assumptions of seriousness as if to exemplify postmodernist aesthetics or simply to make the novel "funny". Rushdie has provided "alternative ways" to look at modern history in his previous books, notably in *Midnight's Children* and *Shame*, but at least in *Shalimar the Clown*, even this "alternative-ness" is not so much predicated upon political motives as a trickster's impulse to outwit the audience by finding a new combination of things or a new pattern of juggling, to borrow a metaphor from *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* (1990) (16). Judging from the treatment of political events and inserted social comments in *Shalimar the Clown*, Rushdie most likely does not intend to provide an "alternative way" of

looking at modern history with a liberal-left slant, or a recognisably “insider” post-9/11 narrative.

### Conclusion

Negative responses to *Shalimar the Clown* stem from the perceived differences between what it is—or what the author attempts to do with it—and what is expected from a “postcolonial” or “magic realist” writer after the events of 9/11. In the two areas that have invited severe recrimination—magic realism and the use of political observations—Rushdie has not changed so greatly since his debut. Rushdie still resorts to the “playful” postmodernist strategies, even though his deliberately superficial portrayal of Kashmir or the US is no longer considered “funny” in a highly emotionally and politically charged climate after 9/11. A “magic realist” or “postcolonial” novel is still expected to produce a heretic or dissenting voice or an alternative way of looking at the world, neither of which Rushdie offers or tries to offer in *Shalimar the Clown*. He could have used Islam or other cultural examples as

useful corollary in the critique of Western modernity, but he chose not to (Almond 109). *Shalimar the Clown* does not provide any noticeably “insider” narrative, either. Instead, the novel provides ample evidence to show that Rushdie has already become an “insider” of the late capitalism of the West.

This “failure” of Rushdie’s, however, poses a question whether a novel can—or if it can, should—produce an alternative vision of the world that is at once complete and comprehensive for Western readers and yet is amply informed by “insider”, alien voices, i.e., a vision that would satisfy such a demanding interpretive community as post-9/11 Anglo-American Rushdie readers. The spokespersons of this community—the reviewers and critics—seek to find in Rushdie’s first “post-9/11” novel an odd mixture of things that usually stand on very different positions across the aesthetic as well as the political spectrum. Interestingly, Head points out a tendency of postcolonial readers of the early-2000s, inspired or influenced to varying degrees by postcolonial critical theory, to expect the impossible: they tend to expect a novel to be “readable” as a fiction, whilst portraying “community convincingly”, exploring “global multicultural questions”, and rejecting or ironising such threats to postcolonial

theory as globalisation at the same time (Head 95-96). As I have argued, not all criticism of *Shalimar the Clown* is motivated by the aversion to globalisation, universalism and cosmopolitanism that Head detects in postcolonial critics (Head 96). But the claim that we expect the impossible is still valid. If Rushdie's oeuvre has been invariably constructed around the aesthetics of superficiality, it cannot produce the whole vision in a way described above for at least two reasons: first, his aesthetics lies in the rejection of the traditional notion of representation and therefore he cannot represent the "insider", nor does his work exemplify globalisation or postcolonial theory; second, his aesthetics aims to subvert or dislocate traditional ways of communication, and therefore his work cannot be "convincing" by definition. *Shalimar the Clown* seems, at first glance, to be the kind of novel that exemplifies the conflation of "magic realist" narratives and "insider" voices expected by Anglo-American reviewers, but, as the account of Anglo-American reviews reveals, it is the last thing that Rushdie seems or even is capable of offering up. Or rather, their expectation makes it harder to accept the novel as it is.

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