

# TRAVELLING OVER THE POSTMODERN WASTELAND: A HUMANIST READING OF SALMAN RUSHDIE'S *SHAME*

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Good literature is of timeless significance; it somehow transcends the limitations and peculiarities of the age it was written in, and thereby speaks to what is constant in human nature (Peter Barry, 1995:17)

## ABSTRACT

The fact that the contemporary world novel is mostly preoccupied with the depiction of the existential pains and conflicts of the postmodern world cannot be gainsaid. The world is plagued with ills; the contemporary novelist therefore rises to the challenge by depicting the present world as one long, unrelieved, nightmarish reality. Actually, the novel gives an explicit expression to chronological primitivism, that is, a profound rejection of the world as it is presently constituted, especially in terms of its human dimension. It is against the backdrop of the foregoing that this paper attempts a humanist reading of Salman Rushdie's *Shame*, most especially the novelist's presentation of evocations of a corrupt, degrading and brutal world which is quite recognisably the postmodern world. Rushdie stands at the apex of the "literary canon of disillusionment", precisely because in his representations of ontological pangs, the reader's apprehension of the dark times he lives in assumes a new intensity. Rushdie's *Shame*, in all ramifications, captures the spirit and mood of the postmodern world. The fictional evaluations of the plight of postmodern man mirror the deepest socio-political experiences of the contemporary world. A thorough analysis of the text reveals that Rushdie is able to convey socio-political realities in memorable postmodernist terms.

Worldwide enquiry into the experience of the postmodern man has gained ground in many disciplines. Literature has granted generous space to the trend. Actually, we cannot gainsay the fact that the contemporary novel has ballooned with

writing about the existential pains and conflicts of the postmodern world. To go by the most important contemporary novels, it would seem that experience in the present age has reduced man to an isolated and frustrated being.

The novelist is the communicant in this grotesque rite, which Wole Soyinka (1967) refers to as "Danse Macabre". The contemporary novel depicts the present world as one long, unrelieved, nightmarish reality. It gives an explicit expression to chronological primitivism, that is, a profound rejection of the world as it is presently constituted, especially in terms of its human dimension.

The image of the global society portrayed in the contemporary novel is entirely correlated with the socio-economic and political crises of hunger, environmental disasters, underdevelopment and dissonance of various types (El Tayeb Wadi, 2000). Yolisa Dalamba (2000:41) also comments on the problems of man in the postmodern world, which mostly constitute the thematic foci of the contemporary novel. In his words: "Today, in 2000, many (African) countries continue to be ravaged by poverty, disease, failing economies, government corruption (military) dictatorships and incessant wars".

Salman Rushdie, the radical postcolonial/postmodern novelist, stands at the apex of the "literary canon of disillusionment", precisely because, in his own idiosyncratic representations of ontological pangs, our apprehension of the dark times we live in assumes a new intensity, a searing illumination. In fact, Rushdie, who became a literary celebrity with his controversial text, *The Satanic Verses*, has imbued the contemporary novel with both thematic and technical innovations. A work of art evokes a vigorous response from its readers only partly on account of its aesthetic features. Though this factor is crucial, equally important is the delight or the shock or the terror of recognition of a given reality, a shared experience in the work of art. According to Niyi Osundare (2000), literature should be committed and functional: "As a writer, I consider mine an unanswerable imagination which responds to the urgency and inevitability of the historic mission. Primary on my mind, central to my art, is that urge to put humanity first..." (56).

Rushdie belongs to the group of the contemporary novelists who have again and again borne out the truth of the foregoing observation with their successive works. Actually, Rushdie's fiction has exercised such a powerful hold on the imagination of his readership and continues to do so because of its power of evocation of crucial aspects of contemporary postcolonial world history. At any rate, if any of the contemporary novelists have a sense of vocation, of mission, of commitment as writers first and foremost, Rushdie belongs to this fold. This claim is in alliance with Shiva Naipaul's early testament to his assumption of the vocation of writing in a specific social and historical context: "No literature is free-floating. Its vitality

springs, initially, from its rootedness in a specific type of world" (1971:122). That is, literature does not evolve out of a vacuum.

However, it is equally important to comment that Rushdie is writing two kinds of fiction. First, there is the social-realistic narrative convention that has been, very much, familiar to readers and still prevails unabated. Second, there is the other kind in which a new language prevails; this is relatively unfamiliar to many, perhaps even most, readers. In short, there is, in the fiction of Rushdie, an uncanny propensity for the artistic blending of the "old novel" and "new novel" (Uma Parameswaran, 1983)

It is against the foregoing background that this paper seeks to explore the depiction of the postmodern man's plight in Rushdie's *Shame*. The analysis centres on the contextual approach to literary valuation which holds "the fundamental assumption that all discourse is contextualised within a framework of culture and history" (Syal Pushpinder, 1991:93). The prose texts of Rushdie, particularly *Shame*, present us with images and evocations of a corrupt, degrading, decentered, falling and brutal world which is quite recognisably the postmodern world. Behind this generalised literary aspect which, in spite of the negativity of the literary representation, always has great rigour and memorableness, lies the central factor of an absence of a definable social ethos, a scale of cohesive values against which all productions, materials and cultures could be measured.

Rushdie's theoretical speculations on literary art probably derive from this lacuna. Like Samuel Beckett in *Waiting for Godot*, in *Shame*, Rushdie portrays a "degrading humanity... and a negationism which admits of no haven" (John Brown, 1988:208). The destitution of Rushdie's postmodern man is transformed into exaltation. In *Shame*, Rushdie portrays a world of conflicts and pains, a world where man ought not to be.

In an interview, Rushdie bares his mind and confirms that his texts are socio-politically realistic. He declares that his novels are based on experiences that are his, a composite cast of several people, and several characters that he has encountered. In his words: "I am one of those writers who believe that a writer has a public function... it becomes almost an obligation of writers who know what is going on" (quoted from Aijaz Ahmad, 1992:382). Rushdie is a writer who believes in social commitment. However, his own brand of social realism, in *Shame*, is different in form and structure. He believes that "the essential task of a Third World novel... is to give appropriate form (preferably allegory, but epic also, or fairy tale, or whatever) to the national experience" (Ahmad Aijaz, 1992:124). We therefore find it apt to make a prognostic statement that Rushdie's fiction, in general, and *Shame*, in particular, cannot be so neatly disentangled from the project of Social realism Remmy Oriaku (1999) remarks that the most recurring thematic preoccupations of contemporary

world literature include alienation, solitary and hostility in the world. Rushdie's *Shame* is no exception.

Thus, in *Shame*, Rushdie negotiates his way through critical realism and magic realism in depicting some of the problems of the postmodern world colonialism, neo-colonialism, inter-racial violence, misuse of power, corruption, betrayal and the like (Nancy Batty, 1987). All these and many other problems plaguing the world are not foregrounded in Rushdie's text, rather they are artistically put on the margins of the text. They are therefore seemingly obliterated with excessive digressions. This is a postmodernist technique used as a counter-canon for the 'obsolete' convention of realism and linear plot structure. To look for the ills plaguing the postmodern world, which are the preoccupations of Rushdie in *Shame*, one needs to concentrate on the 'margins' of the text, and not on its 'centre' alone. Rushdie, in the novel, comments on the seeming oblique realistic style he adopts: "the book would have been banned, dumped in the rubbish bin, burned... Realism can break a writer's heart" (*Shame* p. 70). Therefore, to avoid being censored like many other contemporary writers, Rushdie adopts the method of "modern fairy-tale". His handling of 'history' is very significant indeed. According to Parameswaran (1983; 41), "some of history's violent events have their source in trivial accidents".

In *Shame*, Rushdie touches on various forms of force upon which human misery can be blamed. In the text, the novelist dwells on the reigns of Presidents Zia UI-Hak and Bhutto in Pakistan. He uses the reigns of the duo as the archetype of the socio-political situations in most Third-World Countries. According to Simon During (1995):

*Shame's* purpose is to reconnect *Shame*- that epic, indeed pre-capitalist, emotion the Greeks called *aidos* -to the recent history of Pakistan. In redirecting *Shame*, the novel calls upon a violence, both feminine and monstrous, which does not, like that of *Apocalypse Now*, reach a climax from the very beginning (129).

The novel is unique in its attempt to hold the problems of man altogether -the past, the present and deductively the future. The maintenance of the cyclical theory of history by Rushdie makes the story adventurous and highly visionary.

The type of world depicted in *Shame* is a grotesque one marred by dictatorship, corruption and criminalities of neo-colonial rulers. It is a world of oppression. For instance, the narrator's friend in Karachi spends many months in jail for 'social' reasons - he has a faint acquaintanceship with a man running guns to the guerrillas in Baluchistan. He is hung upside down by the Ankles, and he is thoroughly beaten and

tortured. The novelist wants the reader to see both the military and the civilians as two sides of the same coin. They are all dictators. Rushdie, in *Shame*, comments on the vices of the military and civilian rulers in form of a joke: God came down to Pakistan to see the political situation there. He asked General Ayub Khan (the military dictator) why the place was in such a mess. The "no-good corrupt civilians" were accused of being the cause of the problem. God therefore got rid of the politicians. However, things became worse than ever before. God asked Yahya Khan for the cause of the tension in the land. He blamed his sons and their collaborators for the trouble. God's thunderbolts then wiped out Ayub. That caused a great catastrophe. God agreed with Zulfikar Ali Bhutto that Democracy must return. Yahya was turned into a cockroach and swept under a carpet by God. Unfortunately, the return of democracy was not beneficial, as the situation was still pretty awful. Later, General Zia was given supreme power. The constant change of government from military to civilians and vice versa does not provide a solution to the pains of the people. Actually, facts and social realities of the world are hidden under this joke. It is a truism that one of the problems confronting the postmodern man is instability of government. The postmodern world is plagued with an unceasing tide of coups and counter-coups.

Although the novel is set in Pakistan, it has a universal appeal: "My view is that I am not writing only about Pakistan" (*Shame*, p. 29). The text can be conveniently situated in the class of all Third-World literatures, which Fredric Jameson (1981) refers to as "national allegories". The society portrayed in the text is one where the army and the civilians engaged each other in hot rivalry. In fact, rivalries and corruption are the bane of their interaction. The Army is typified in the novel by Razar Hyder, the Rushdie's fictional personage of Zia, and the civilians are represented by Iskander Harappa who is the fictional equivalent of Bhutto. However, the 'serio-comic' strategies of Rushdie, in the text, hide the enormity of the misdeeds of the political figures. The novelist coalesces satirical elements (parody, burlesque and buffoon-like caricatures of the real dictators) to expose the misdeeds of the postmodern rulers. But behind the humour lies the seriousness of the message. The text is a form of political parable condemning the ineptitude, vacuity, personal insecurity, sexual obsessions, absurdities of ambition and the catastrophic ends of some postmodern rulers.

The problem of election malpractices across the globe is also one of the myriads of decadence of the postmodern world discussed by Rushdie in his *Shame*. For instance, the election that brings Prime Minister Harappa to power is fraught with anomalies. Some of the electorates are disenfranchised - they are unable to locate the locations of the ballot boxes. However, those who are the supporters of the Prime Minister are able to cast their own votes as many times as they like:

"Others, stronger swimmers in those seas, succeeded in expressing their preferences twelve or thirteen times' (*Shame*, p. 178). The election is also flawed by lack of total electoral decorum, excessive rigging, arson, riots, breakdown of order, injustice, etc. The rival parties (for instance, The Popular Front) are banned from the election. The former ruler is under trial for 'war crimes', and is judicially hanged in the middle of the night. The press are censored; there is no freedom of speech: "I want them in the darkest jail; I want them finished, defunct, Kaput!" (*Shame*, p. 261). In fact, it is a truism that political turbulence is one of the commonest sources of human conflicts and pains in the world today. It has left millions of people dead, maimed, undernourished and displaced. The oppositions reject the election results; mobs in the cities cry corruption; there are riots and strikes. Army are sent to fire on the civilians. The society is a hell of unnecessary conflicts: "What are war and peace if not the twin poles between which nations have swung from times immemorial" (Hemmings, 1990:556). Also, the Langago Deputy Speaker is reported to have been killed in the National Assembly when the furniture is flung at him by elected representatives.

The pang of entrapment is the horror of the average Rushdiean (wo)man. The image of being trapped is a motif in Rushdie's fiction. For instance, Bilquis's life pain stems from her unsuccessful desire for male children. She is also emotionally upset by her husband's (Harappa's) frustrated political ambitions, as well as the cruelty of her husband. Her father also commits suicide due to domestic burden as a result of the death of his wife, and societal humiliation and pressure. Rani is another archetypal character who is symbolic of the plight of the postmodern Rushdiean (Wo) man. She has an infidel husband (Hyder). The rise and fall of Rani's husband's political career is another source of her pains. Sufiya Zinobia, the '*Shame*' herself, is an embodiment of the problems of the postmodern (wo)man. She suffers from brain fever, humiliation and volcanic urge to violence. Her father wants a hero of a son, but she comes as an idiot daughter instead, a simpleton, a nonentity. She is cured of the brain fever ailment by a local Hakim, but with a side effect (inner deceleration) which slows her down for the rest of her years. At the age of nineteen, she still carries the brain of a six-year-old child. Therefore, her problems are from two sources - sex and mentality.

Sufiya Zinobia is depicted as a destroyer of men and animals; she is a vampire, a temptress, a human guillotine. At twelve years old, she kills two hundred and eighteen turkeys in the Turkey-yard of the widow Aurangzeb, tearing up their heads and then drawing their guts up through their necks with her tiny hands. Also, in the day of her sister's (Good New Hyder's) wedding, which is supposed to be a day of happiness for the family,

Sufiya Zinobia twists the neck of her brother-in-law (Talvar Ulhaq) as she had earlier done for the turkeys. This marks the end of the Polo-playing career of Talvar Ulhaq. All those practical manifestations of mental neurosis are concomitant effects of the domestic and social alienation suffered by Zinobia. For example, she lacks sexual satisfaction. Her husband (Omar Khayyam) is forbidden from having sexual intercourse with her, but with Shahbhanou, the Parsee Ayah, Zinobia's maid. She therefore leaves the house and forcefully takes four men, rapes them, murders them and returns home with semen and blood on her veils. In fact, the portrayal of Zinobia is to depict Rushdie's view of the world in general and women in particular. She is characterized as a four-legged beast. The plight of Good News Hyder is not different from others. She is afflicted with the problem of excessive procreation. The narrator diminishes her human attributes by portraying her as a 'beast'. When she is overburdened with the problem of excessive procreation, like a pig, she commits suicide.

In *Shame*, Rushdie portrays a gallery of sick people. Madness, violence, phobia and dementia are few of the conditions of the Rushdiean (wo)men. We come across the frigid and the desexualised women like Arjumand the virgin ironpants; the demented and the moronic, for instance the twenty-odd years of Zinobia's childhood; the people who are dulled into nullity, for example Farah; the ones driven into despair (Rani and Bilquis, for instance); the people who are frustrated into committing suicide (for example, Good News Hyder), and those who are incoherent, anti-social and devoid of individual identity like the three Shakil sisters, the three crazy sinful witches.

Ahmad Aijaz's analysis of Rushdie's *Shame*, most especially his exploration of the pains of the postmodern world, in the novel, is quite engrossing and critical. He dwells on the socio-political sub-text of the text and latches on to discuss the representation of man's plight in the imaginative world of Rushdie. However, we part company with Aijaz when he goes on to condemn Rushdie's portrayal of the womenfolk in the novel. To him: "there is something fatally wrong with a novel in which virtually every woman is to be pitied; most are to be laughed at; some are to be feared..." (1992:151).

A contextualised reading of *Shame* will surely exonerate the novelist of any form of misogyny or misanthropy. Rushdie is only being too meticulous in his exposure of the plight of the womenfolk in an average Third-world country as it really

is. Probably, more than many other contemporary writers, Rushdie has been able to take off the wrapping off the patriarchal world dictators and expose their misdeeds. He rejects the postmodern and the contemporary world as it is. The cruelty of the ruling class calls for the pervading problems of the Rushdiean women. Actually, the postmodern world, as shown in the novel, has turned every normal human being into a mentally deranged person. Since an occupant of a sick world is naturally sick, in the Rushdiean world, everybody, irrespective of age, sex, status and affiliation, is socially, physically, mentally, politically and economically sick. According to the narrator of the text: "and cases of fever and madness increased by four hundred and twenty per cent" (133). The Rushdiean (wo)man is a dictator, a betrayer, a non-conformist, a mentally derailed person, and a loather of his/ her siblings. This is a veritable index of the pains of the postmodern world which is palpably sick. Rushdie, in *Shame*, has offered a diagnosis of the maladies of the contemporary world history through the cases of insanity, which populate the text.

The family of the Hyders are embodiments of the horrors and despairs trailing the postmodern man. Bariamma, the blind old lady, gives a catalogue of the family pains. The woman describes the family as being plagued by divorces, droughts, bankruptcies, child morality, diseases of the breast, men cut down in their prime, failed hopes, curses, sterility, murder, suicide, etc. The juicy and gory sagas of Raza and Bilquis about their respective families show that the postmodern world is replete with pains. G.S. Fraser (1964) comments on the existential problems of the contemporary world. He believes that there is a wide lacuna between God and his world; "the world is a fallen world, man a fallen creature" (16). Dasylya (1995) also comments on the ontological problems of the postmodern man: "the hero of fiction is considered perpetually in search of totality, estranged from a world either too large or too narrow to give meaning and shape to his desires, a world abandoned by God" (84). Actually, *Shame* is full of deracinated and frenetic people. The characters are indices of what people might become under the stress of ill-health, depression and frustration. (Wo)man, in the postmodern world, as depicted in the text, is perverted, not perfected.

The jeremiad tone and apocalyptic temper of Rushdie's *Shame* are also evident in his depiction of the old Shakil, a widower for eighteen years. Old Shakil refers to his town as "a hell hole" (11). This suggests that the postmodern world is a hell. The man suffers greatly from delirium, "a ceaseless and largely incomprehensible monologue" (11). This monologue is full of obscenity, oaths and curses. In fact, he is mentally sick. He becomes an old recluse and diminishes the outside world before his painful death. His monologue is set against himself, calling eternal damnation down upon his soul. His death is an index of the asphyxiating fist of *Shame*. Due to the domestic and generational conflict between him and his three daughters, he is moc-



ked by his children during his painful days. The children weave occult spells to hasten the moment of their father's demise. The postmodern world is one which sets family members against one another. According to Orr (1990:626), "The reality of the modern predicament is the absence of love; community, both as communion and communication, breaks down". It is a world of betrayal where brothers have been betraying brothers, friends have been betraying friends, and children have been betraying parents for generations.

Old Shakil, for instance, is too strict on his children. They are not educated; they are not well catered for; they are not permitted to mix with people; they are kept indoors like prisoners. Therefore, the three daughters maintain a lesbian life, forging an unbreakable bond. The problem of domestic feud is not limited to the Shakil family. Haroun Harappa is also in conflict with his father. A radical student, Haroun writes articles in the student magazines at the Angrez University about the misdeeds and misrule of his father. He has an undying hatred for his father. Haroun is later indicted for the actual performance of the killing of his father because of his apparent hatred for his father.

The lives of the three Shakil sisters (Chhunni, Munnee and Bunny) are also full of the pangs of the postmodern world. From the beginning of the text to the end, we read about their pains, conflicts, vices and stress. Initially, one of the sisters is said to have committed a sin against God; she is accused of sexual infidelity. She is put into the family way before wedlock. The three Shakil sisters are also very callous. They poison Yakoob Balloch, the town's finest handyman, who builds waiter for them in order to maintain their secrecy. Thereafter, the Shakil sisters recede entirely from the society and keep themselves into self-imposed captivity. In fact, the pressure of life has made the postmodern man an alien in the hostile world. The same world which flowed with milk and honey for the pre-modern man now flows with tears and bile for the postmodern citizen of the world.

The city is not quite different from the rural area. Omar Khayyam's "mothers" are very rigid. Like their late father, the three Shakil sisters do not allow their son much freedom to lead his life the way he likes. He therefore leaves home for the city. With the emigration of Omar Khayyam to the city, the novelist is able to expose the ubiquitous nature of the postmodern vices, pains and conflicts. In the city, Omar Khayyam becomes a bad individual. He has been uprooted from his root and becomes "a cosmic pariah who, for self-identification, clings in vain to elemental phenomena and events" (Ibitokun, 2000:220). He is locked into a marriage that mirrors the fruitless victimisation that is characteristic of the post-modernist world. He marries a nitwit (Sufiya Zinobia) in order to woo her father (Hyder), the killer of his brother (Babar). The marriage contract between Omar Khayyam and Sufiya

Zinobia has a clause which forbids the husband from removing his bride from her parents' home without their prior permission. Unfortunately, Omar Khayyam dies without a single sire by Sufiya Zinobia.

What about Eduardo Rodrigues who commits professional misconduct with his pupil, Farah Zoroaster? He is thus dismissed from his job for bringing *Shame* to the profession. One of the most grievous sins, according to Sharia laws, is also committed by Rodrigues and Farah- they abort the pregnancy. Thereafter, Farah becomes a social misfit. She is guilty of infamy, and her lascivious flirtings are culpable. To aggravate the plight of Farah, her father becomes mentally derailed. He goes about the streets naked. Thereafter, the fate of a crazy father and a whore-child is very appalling. They live in the city of idolaters, despite the self-righteousness of the people. Such is the spiritual vacuity of the postmodern man who always professes piety without putting it in action.

*Shame* projects the conflicts and pains of the people of the postmodern world. It engenders actions and counter-actions. The world of the story, that is the wider socio-political and historical circumstances and conditions of the text (Ogundeji, 1988) is one where ambitions are not achievable. It is a world of nullity, a world inundated with total failure and temporary success. For instance, majority of the characters in the text the old Shakil, the three Shakil sisters, Omar Khayyam, Iskander, etc. are portrayed as people symbolizing the impoverishing spirit of mankind in the contemporary world. The old Shakil and his children lack good spirit towards one another; Omar Khayyam is indifferent to the life and death of his brother (Babar); the Shakil sisters murder the handyman, Yakoob Balloch, brutally. It is also reported that in the East End of London, a Pakistani father murders his only child, his daughter, for making love to a white boy. This inter-racial love is seen as a dishonour to the family. Such is the fate of the postmodern man in a world where father can brutally turn a knife-blade against his own flesh and blood. Babar is murdered before his twenty-third birthday, at a guerrilla war. He is shot through the heart by Raza Hyder. Surprisingly, his brother refuses to mourn his death; "brothers have done the worst of things to brothers" (p. 27).

Repeated tropes of isolation, exile, guilt, spiritual and economic denial and other horrors of the postmodern world keep on recurring in the text. Some of the characters go through the spurts of loneliness despite the fact that opportunities abound for camaraderie. The old Shakil and his children suffer the pain of solitude. Even the loneliness of Omar Khayyam and Sufiya Zinobia is strange because they are "married" and yet they remain lonely. This is due to parental restriction and the mental condition of the bride. This reflects the form of dissonance that pervades the entire society of the novel. Indeed, the lives and deaths of the major characters in

the novel depict, dramatically, the gripping picture of man in the postmodern world. Omar Shakil, his maternal grandfather, his 'mothers', his bosses, etc. Keep on struggling, in vain, to survive physically, socially, economically and politically in the world devoid of comfort and actualisation. They strike the reader as sufferers struggling in a tottering world.

In *Shame*, the novelist confronts the reader with an array of depravities and misdeeds- murder, suicide, alienation, betrayal, untimely deaths, rape, etc. Actually, the novel deals, in a painfully candid way, with revelation of man's plight in the postmodern world. It is dominated by the figure of the 'marginal man' - alienated and absurd character, caught between their own inadequacies and those imposed on them by their society. Science shows the world to be infinite in its complexity, so also, "the postmodernist novel shows experience to be limitless" (John Orr, 1990:620).

The problems of the postmodern world, as depicted in Rushdie's *Shame*, do not totally exclude children and youths. In this painful world, everybody, irrespective of age and background, suffers. There are cases of child-labour and child-kidnapping. For example, in the country's shanty-towns and slums, children disappear in great number. They are abducted to the Gulf to provide cheap labour. Thus, the small kids who should be enjoying their lives are exploited by the Arab princelings in unnameable ways. It is inferred that some parents even intentionally do away with the unwanted members of their outsized families. The people, children inclusive, live in a hostile environment. There are cases of murders of animals and men; villages are raided in the dark. Issues of dead children (infantile mortality), slaughtered flocks, blood-curdling hawks, etc. are very rampant in the Rushdiean world. In fact, the idea of history in Rushdie's text is "temperamentally hostile to the notion of progress" (Orwell and Angus, 1968:507). The world is depicted as a battle-field for all. Most of the deaths and suicides in the text are society-induced. For example, Begum Talvar Ulhaq is found in her bedroom hanged by the neck, dead. She leaves a suicide note that her action is dictated by societal agonies.

The fall of Raza Hyder also portrays the postmodern world as a "wasteland". He, his wife and Omar Khayyam, escapes from the city in disguise, in women's wears. They have only the very little amount of money they find in their pockets. Therefore, they are able to eat little, but they drink, as much as possible, livid cordials, pink tea scooped out of large aluminium pots, water drawn from yellow lakes in which enervated water-buffalo sprawls. They have sleepless days and nights during their migration; they are also encumbered with fear and despair. Such is the fate of an erstwhile president and his family. The sudden negative metamorphosis of Raza Hyder is pitiable. Rushdie, with his postmodernist temper, bemoans the plight

of the people in the world. Thus: "the world was an earthquake, abysses yawned, dream-temples rose and fell..." (*Shame*, 274). The fall of Raza Hyder also possesses some didactic undertone. It shows that human strive is meaningless and pathetic. Man is always annihilated by opposing members in the opposing strata. Thus, the Rushdiean (wo)man is always submerged by cosmic and societal forces. Hyder and Bilquis fall from grace to grass in order to show that "man is ontologically a loner, a nothingless" (Ibitokun, 1995:3).

Rushdie's *Shame* is predominantly critical. It stands supreme as an adverse view of the postmodern world. Man's experiences are fused into theatrical metaphors. The fall of the rulers in the world of the novel suggests the futility of man's existence; man is depicted as a stranger on earth. Hyder and Bilquis die in exile; Omar Khayyam and his mothers end their lives as 'strangers' to one another, as foes. In fact, Rushdie, in the text, is politically contemporary. His art is quite relevant to the socio-political experience of the contemporary world. He also tacitly disapproves of the tendencies and conflicts of the period. His evaluations of the socio-political malaise of the contemporary world mirror the deepest experiences of his time. The postmodern world, as depicted in the text, is "a place where human beings are doomed to repeated suffering" (Damon DeCoste, 1999:448).

Thus, in the novel, Rushdie reflects and refracts the pains of life as felt by the three strata of the society - upper, middle and low. The reader comes across the problems of the civilian and military hegemonies, the doctors and those at the lowest rungs of the ladder, for instance, the maid of Sufiya Zinobia, Shahbhanou, who is used as mere stuff for the sexual gratification of her mistress's husband. However, the encumbrances of life are not the same across social strata. Ibitokun (1979) comments on this: The pangs and throes of life are not felt the same way by two different people. This distributional phenomenon of miseries comes from the fact that in life there is a social spectrum of classes (22).

Also, the type of 'tale' told by Rushdie, in *Shame*, has "some referential quality to the condition of man in society" (Akporobaro, 2000:329). Since literature is a social discourse, it always expresses socio-cultural perceptions of the novelist about the postmodern world. In the text, Rushdie dwells on many paradigms of the indifferent and hostile world. Actually, Rushdie's *Shame* proves the veracity of the claim of Bamidele (2000) that "the novel is inevitably contemporary social history" (90). We cannot gainsay the fact that Rushdie's art is inextricably handcuffed to history (Uma Parameswaran, 1983). Although Rushdie is a political exile, he is still much in touch with the problems of his society and the world in general. Unceasing immigration has greatly influenced Rushdie's art, most especially his ability to imaginatively capture the throes and pains of almost every society of the world. Accor-

ding to Bart Moore-Gilbert, Gareth Stanton and Willy Maley (1997): "Salman Rushdie's *Shame*... is only one of the scores of fictions of this period in which a fundamental connection between immigration and the literary imagination is sought or asserted" (263).

In *Shame*, Rushdie presents life as ontologically a mystery; its meaninglessness is reflected in almost all facets of man's existence. The struggle of man is from cradle to grave. Right from the day a man is born, his existential problems begin. He thinks about his agonies which are ready to outweigh him or even outdo him at any time. At the tail end of his struggle, the terminator (death) is awaiting him. This is the fate of the postmodern man, as represented in the text, by Shakil family, the Harappa family, the family of Raza Hyder, and the like. At the end, Omar Khayyam, for instance, keeps wondering why he was even born into this world of war and worries, disaster and disillusionment, hopelessness and hardship - all but with few glimpses of happiness that fast dwindles away. Since most of the 'Rushdiean (wo)men are not virtuous, their lives are devoid of happiness; they are full of pains and conflicts. Plato, like Socrates his master, once opines: "the goal of human life is happiness, and the only road to it is through a virtuous life" (quoted from Joseph Omoregbe, 1993:161). Therefore, most of the characters in Rushdie's *Shame* experience ontological pains because of their own inherent flaws and societal dictates.

## Conclusion

This paper has pursued the relationship between the contemporary writer and his 'world' as it relates to one of the fictional texts of Rushdie (*Shame*). Among the committed contemporary writers, Rushdie stands unique both in the content and form of his fiction. His art is a repository to (neo)colonial writings. He is laudable for his ability to infuse history with appropriate reconstruction and stylistic felicities. Actually, the story in *Shame* is superbly robust in both 'matter' and 'manner'. This is expected of Rushdie, because he has a penchant for showing his readership that he is a writer to be reckoned with. He is able to negotiate his literary path through the province of Balzac and Zola and the world of Derrida and Foucault. That is, he is able to convey socio-political realism with postmodernist aesthetics.

It would be fair to comment that *Shame* justifies, in all ramifications, the spirit and mood of the postmodern world. It could be established as a socio-political novel because it depicts the various associative complications which result in a society whose socio-political climate is marred by disenchantment, destabilisation and confusion. Rushdie's fictional evaluations of the plight of the postmodern (wo)man mirror the deepest socio-political experiences of the contemporary world. Art, more

often than not, reflects and refracts the socio-political realities of its enabling milieu, Rushdie's *Shame* is no exception. In the novel, he gives the reader a balanced portrayal of the problems of the age, which are tagged 'Shame'. Like Milan Kundera, Rushdie, in the text, has attempted a compassionate study of individuality and human relations, and their impairment by ideological, social and political systems.

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