

## The Representational Politics of Autism in Salman Rushdie's *Shame*

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### Abstract

The upcoming field of disability studies has challenged us to rethink canonical literature and to understand the underlying politics in the representation of disability. This paper has dealt with the unexplored area of autism, a neurobiological condition, and Salman Rushdie's depiction of it in *Shame*. It explores the ways in which Rushdie has chosen to depict Sufiya the protagonist as an autistic person within the text and the interweaving of violence and negative affect that succeeds the depiction. Unfortunately, such a depiction reinforces the stereotype of violence and causes significant damage to the person on the autism spectrum.

**Keywords:** Autism; Affect; Disability; Representational politics.

Though *Shame* has been frequently analyzed over the years as a political allegory, as a post-colonial text and as a feminist dialectical narrative, very few readings have evolved on the writer's representation of disability in the text. This study on *Shame* intends to look into how the writer has translated the neurological condition of autism within the text and how the narrative of violence is intermingled within the signification.

Salman Rushdie's *Shame* coagulates the real and the imaginary, the probable and the impossible. The text revolves around two politically charged families in Pakistan- the Hyders and the Harappas. Sufiya Zinobia, the protagonist, is born to Raza Hyder and Bilquis and later marries Omar Khayyam Shakil, a doctor. Sufiya's murder of Omar Khayyam and her subsequent transformation into the white panther forms the plot of *Shame*. Though not disabled at birth, Sufiya's intellectual disability with autism (hence to be referred to as autism) is attributed to three reasons- as a retribution to her mother's sins (101), as a remedy she took for brain fever (100), and due to the "continuous blows her mother rained on her head" (109).

Rushdie while signifying Sufiya an autistic person associates the word 'blush' with regard to her. Conventionally blushing is understood as the tendency to look away from the causative agent which results in instant lack of eye contact. As indicated by William Hirstein in *Brain Fiction: Self-Deception and the Riddle of Confabulation* autistic subjects tend to have large

skin conductance response to locking eye gaze with another person (113), which makes it increasingly difficult for them to make and sustain an eye contact. Since the reason for Sufiya's blush is unknown, her continuous diversion of gaze can be interpreted as the result of her autism. Yet in opposition to the typical description of autism seen in autism fiction, where an autistic person does not comprehend emotions, Sufiya registers feelings which are unnoticeable to others. Rushdie narrates how she absorbed "like a sponge, a host of unfelt feelings" (122). Sufiya's hyper sensitivity leads to blushing which makes her a participant in any crime, even if she were innocent of its shame. In a parallel reading of the autistic body, this could be seen as her physical response to an over stimulation due to autism.

Autism is signified through Sufiya's love for arranging furniture around the room, which she constantly arranges and rearranges:

During his married life Omar Khayyam was forced to accept without argument Sufiya Zinobia's childlike fondness for moving the furniture around. Intensely aroused by these forbidden deeds, she arranged tables, chairs, lamps, whenever nobody was watching like a *favourite secret game*, which she played with a *frighteningly stubborn gravity*... 'Honestly, wife,' he wanted to exclaim, 'God knows what you will change with all this shifting shifting'.  
(71 Emphasis added)

Patricia Howlin in *Autism and Asperger Syndrome: Preparing for Adulthood* has explained how the complex interactions of an autistic child with his surroundings change with adulthood. For several people such actions keep "fear and anxiety under control" (137). Rushdie renders to his autistic protagonist obsessive behavior patterns which she does with "frighteningly stubborn gravity" (138). Sufiya's continual caressing of pebbles in her hand is another overt sign of belonging to the autism spectrum. The narrator also notes that Sufiya would "tear each damaged hair in two, all the way down to the roots. She did this *seriously, systematically*" (136 Emphasis added). The 'repetitive nature' of this task done by Sufiya, "seriously" and "systematically" and with accuracy, brings to light the habitual features of people on the autism spectrum.

Rushdie signifies Sufiya as an autistic person by highlighting the working of a mind which tends to conjure fictional images. Rushdie explores how Sufiya replays images of happy times in her mind and how she stores it within herself to play it whenever needed:

She likes it now that she is sometimes left alone and the things can happen in her head, the favourite things she

keeps in there, locked up; when people are present she never dares to take things out and play with them in case they get taken away or broken by mistake... she fills her mind with happy images, so that there won't be room for the other things, things she hates. (213)

Sufiya also displays the characteristic autistic trait of denial and prefers the life of make believe.

Rushdie signifies Sufiya as an autistic by highlighting the blankness of her eyes. Often along with autistic gaze aversion, the neurotypicals are also confused with the 'blank stare', a state of unreadability in the eyes of the autistic person. This unreadability, a recurring image in autism fiction leads to massive reinterpretations making it 'unsettling' at best and 'non-human' at worst. Rushdie specifically describes Sufiya's eyes, as "blank as milk" (131) and "her eyes, while she worked, acquired a *dull glint*, a gleam of *distant* ice or fire from far below their habitually *opaque surface*" (136 Emphasis added) which undeniably circumscribe her to the autism spectrum.

Sufiya is a low functioning nonverbal autistic person whose speech impediment too typifies her as having juvenile regressive autism. Rushdie's usage of a female autistic body to evoke the metaphor of a Beast is not purely fictive, but based on the innate tendency of an autistic person to impersonate a character, a person or a thing. As authorized by medical studies and life writing by people on the spectrum, autistic persons in general tend to impersonate (Williams, Donna. *Nobody Nowhere*). At times this character becomes intensely personal, so much so that they start to resemble the character they impersonate. Quite often this act of impersonating becomes an act of defense mechanism against unwanted thoughts. In *Shame* Sufiya metamorphoses her isolation and loneliness caused by her disability into the Beast. Hence it is rightly said that she "wills the beast into existence" (93)

It is evident that the politics Rushdie employs in signifying Sufiya as an autistic person is to visualize her as strangely innocent, yet having the potential for metamorphosis. To this translation of the working of an autistic mind, Rushdie inserts the stereotype of violence by pitching her between the duality of the twin phases of the "good thoughts" and the "bad thoughts" (69) which collide within her.

The politics of signification of autism in *Shame* is further visualized when to make Sufiya fascinating, Rushdie raises her mental age twice to suit the plot. At the mental age of six and a half, when Sufiya is able to control her physical urges, she is pushed into marriage saying "in many opinions brains are a positive disadvantage to a woman in marriage" (*Shame* 56). The mental

age is further raised to nine and a half in the latter part of the text to make her comprehend that there is a gulf between the reality she is in and what is generically expected of a woman in a marriage. She is able to understand that her life lacks certain things, though she is unable to explicitly pin point what they are. Rushdie raises her mental age just enough to insinuate that there is a surreptitious sexual relationship between her husband and her ayah, Shahbanou which has resulted in the latter's growing tummy. However Rushdie's imprinting of Sufiya as a person on the spectrum and at the same time manipulating the mental age is paradoxical.

Rushdie infuses violence into the character of Sufiya thereby reiterating the cultural positioning of a person on the autism spectrum as one capable of unaccounted violence. This "sinister aura" of violence that is bestowed on her, stems from the social and cultural beliefs existent during the period. Rushdie's Sufiya is born out of two violent "stories": one was that of a Pakistani woman who was murdered by her father because by "making love to a white boy she had brought such dishonor upon her family that only her blood could wash away the stain" (115), and the other was that of an Asian girl who was attacked and murdered by a group of white boys. Rushdie affirms "my Sufiya Zinobia grew out of the corpse of that murdered girl" (116). Within the premise of the plot, this predetermined narrative of violence gets retranslated as the violence of the autistic Sufiya through three specific instances. The primary act of violence occurs when Sufiya's sleepwalking leads to her massive slaughtering of two hundred odd turkeys in Pinkie Aurangzeb's yard where "Sufiya Zinobia had torn off their heads and then reached down into their bodies to draw their guts up through their necks with her tiny weaponless hands" (138). The intense irrationality behind these acts of uncontrolled vehemence and violence spurs concern, and as decapitating of heads becomes Sufiya's signature style, it extends from animals to humans with high alacrity. The "somnolent demon" of violence that embodies Sufiya later emerges during her sister Naveed's wedding reception, leaving the groom almost murdered:

... She buried her teeth in his neck...and sending his blood spurting long distances across the gathering, so that all family and many of the camouflaged guests began to resemble workers in a halal slaughter house. Talvar was squealing like a pig, and when they finally dragged Sufiya Zinobia off him she had a morsel of his skin and flesh in her teeth. (170-71)

The violence that stems out of her tiny body when she evolves into a beast is unaccountable and dons a "supernatural passion" (171). The detailed exposition of the murder of the three adolescents (216) also brings to light

Sufiya's potent sexuality. Omar, Sufiya's husband had been asked not to consummate their marriage and Sufiya was left to be a virgin. This consciously suppressed sexuality erupts through the beast who allows four adolescents to make love to her before murdering them. Pertinent to the discussion is also the need to remember that an autistic body as Sufiya's is seen to be obsessed by sexuality and based on the notorious history of eugenics and the intellectually disabled, this is not surprising.

Rushdie's autistic and bestial Sufiya is a subaltern too as the narrator refuses to give Sufiya a chance to tell her story. Though overtly Sufiya ceases to be an autistic subaltern with her transformation into the beast, paradoxically, she is again silenced, drugged and imprisoned as the abhorred beast thereby shifting the subaltern status from one position to another. Again Rushdie's use of Sufiya as a symbol does not allow her to be 'normal', as she is either less than normal or not normal at all. Sufiya is described as "pure" and "clean" (manifestation of idyllic innocence) in a "dirty" world surrounded by characters who are tainted (142). She is simultaneously "Sufiya the Beast" and "Sufiya the saint" (141) and her dual symbolism makes her either human or less-than-human. As Anupama Iyer in "Depiction of Intellectual Disability in Fiction" rightly points out, the subliminal quality of such symbols, serves to dismantle the identity of the intellectually disabled as ordinary individuals and undermines their lived experiences. Accordingly "when portrayed as symbols and stereotypes, people with intellectual disabilities are not allowed the dignity of ordinary abilities, difficulties and assets. Instead, their disability bears what Susan Sontag calls 'the metaphorical and symbolic weight' of the images assigned to them" (Iyer 132).

The narrator in *Shame* unambiguously takes the persona of Rushdie himself and leads his readers through the maze of his tangled memories. His asides too engulf the plot and as pointed by critic Ben-Yishai in "The Dialectic of Shame", "the question of representation is foregrounded in these asides by their very appearance and conceit of being somewhat more real and ontologically, less fictional" (198). In addition, the form of the metanarratives works relentlessly to give an impression of "laying bare the device", and hence providing the readers with "absolute moments of candor, truth and almost transparency" (198). The text is indeed authenticated by political facts about Pakistan, confessional anecdotes, an autobiographical mode of narration and a personal voice in addition to more than twenty cross cultural references from the Hagian Calender to Pierre Cardin. Thus the reader does not challenge the construction of the narrative, but accepts it without negotiation due to the authoritative voice that is involved. On one hand when the narration draws in "commensurable realities" (Hart 2008) the

text starts to authenticate itself. At this threshold the dark metaphors used against the disabled become more real and the jibes become more lucid and sharp. This yanking of the text away from the realm of the fictional into the 'real' world, spells danger for the disabled, as the denigration of the autistic too suddenly becomes real.

Such texts as *Shame* have also led to studies which seek to answer the question if disability could generate a narrative. Interestingly, Rushdie's narrator does express dissent in employing Sufiya's disability as a tool of conversation when he convincingly admits, "I did this to her, I think, to make her pure. Couldn't think of another way of creating purity in what is supposed to be the Land of the Pure... and idiots are, by definition innocent. Too romantic a use to make of mental disability? Perhaps, but it's too late for such doubts" (120). While addressing this issue, what cannot be overlooked is the ethical dilemma in representing an individual who cannot give consent to the authenticity of representation, nor is able to speak for oneself and attempts by others to speak for them entails misrepresentation.

Sufiya symbolizes dual subalternity from another perspective too, namely that of being a subjugated Pakistani woman and of being an autistic 'other'. Interestingly unlike many writings where the subaltern succumbs to her surroundings, Rushdie's heroine initially at least, is seen to rise from her branded position and unleashes back fury where in the usual course the only choice would have been silent suffering. To critic Jenny Sharpe in "The Limits of What is Possible: Reimagining Sharam in Salman Rushdie's *Shame*" Sufiya's powers represent Rushdie's attempt to reorder honour and shame and to find a place for women's rage (3). Extending the above argument, the text could indeed be seen as the writer's abortive attempt to rechart territories for the disabled body as Rushdie works at the polarity between *izzat* and *sharam*, (honour and shame) and tries to re-ascribe the body of the disabled into these dual zones.

It is also evident that at the focal point of Rushdie's text lies the exposition of shame- not merely the concept of shame, but also of shame as a negative affect. *Shame* places "sharam" in close affinity primarily with the feminine disabled body, where it gets retranslated as both the purity and the wholesomeness of a woman. As the narrator explicates, 'shame' connotes multiple meanings of "embarrassment, discomfiture, decency, modesty, shyness" of a woman (35). As David W. Hart posits in "Making a Mockery of Mimicry: Salman Rushdie's *Shame*", the intrinsic effect of shame as used by Rushdie is for it to be a "protective mechanism" or a "regulating mechanism for social conduct" (2008) that was essential for the 'safety' of a woman, more so for an autistic woman. Hence it is evident that Rushdie's use of the features of autism within *Shame* is intended to add more shame,



and consequently more guilt, to an already shamed female body signifying double marginalization at the very outset. Again shame is a signifier of a collective identity as the narrator says, "the shame of any one of us sits on us all and bends our backs" (84). It also becomes indistinguishable from one's self with the passage of time as Rushdie writes, "But shame is like everything else, live with it long enough and it becomes part of the furniture" (21). It can also be safely surmised that it is the dual disenchantment and embarrassment that she faces due to her 'shame' that eventually leads to her transition as the beast. Omar Khayyam, the "peripheral hero" (25), and the second prominent character in the text is consistently taught by his mother's not to register the "forbidden emotion of shame" (33). He is asked to evade it completely as it makes "your heart start shivering", it made women "want to cry and die," and men to "go wild" (34). Ironically while Omar Khayyam is taught to defy shame, the autistic Sufiya is unconsciously taught to absorb it. As Hart has observed, none of the men, Raza, Iskander or Omar seem to have this emotional quality, while Sufiya seems to be subsumed by it (2008). Rushdie notes "She was, as her mother had said, the incarnation of their shame" (210). Just as her mother accepts her shame at the birth of her daughter saying, "He wanted a hero of a son, I gave him an idiot instead... I must accept it. She is my shame" (101), Sufiya too willingly receives it. It is curious that even the minor instances of Sufiya's dissension to accept shame is willfully and summarily rejected by the narrator, who renders in extensive detail-how she represents not only the shame of herself or even that of her family, but also that of her country.

*Shame* by integrating numerous violent histories into the narration, such as the murder of a daughter by a Pakistani father, or the bloodied history of Pakistani leaders, the text sets the pace for Sufiya's violence and her story becomes indistinguishable from the legend of the white panther, which is blamed for the numerous deaths nationwide. The interlinking of negative affect of shame and the affect of distress generated against autistic bestial Sufiya is translated to the reader in its intensity, impelling the reader not to turn away from the text, but from the character. Largely a mute autistic person, Sufiya's lack of speech is utilized by the narrator who refuses to give her a voice and circumscribes her to her role without resistance. Thus the negative affect of shame that circulates around Sufiya, her existence, her pitiable marriage and her metamorphosis as the beast cannot be erased. Unfortunately Sufiya is never looked at with sympathy or pity, but in the counter deification of her metamorphic figure, the narration renders her predisposed to all change and yet adept in transitioning into vengeance. The tragedy is that the negative affects that well up within the personae of Sufiya, communicate as negative affect towards autism itself. Hence the

reinstating of the cultural stereotype of autism and violence through fiction generates negative affects which become metonymic of the condition of autism itself.

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