Mapping the Reality of Past through 'Memory Spaces' - Reading Kashmir between the Lines of History: An Analysis of Salman Rushdie's *Shalimar the Clown*

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The boom of theoretical formulations on the study of human mind and human language led to many essential inquiries in to knowledge system as understood and defined the way it was until the 1950s. The Structuralist and Poststructuralist approaches in such inquiries kindled the human understanding to explore yet another level (a realist plane at that) in search of truth and meaning. The question of truth and meaning posed many crucial problems to be discussed, because language in the form of text assumed many layers of complexity, which was proportionate to the complexity of the human mind itself. Hence the human mind, language and text became the focal points of all the theoretical debates that became prominent in the second half of the twentieth century.

All the scholarly investigations on mind, language and text increasingly emphasized the liminality between truth and reality or fact and perception, and unanimously found a target in history, in its knowledge, methodology and truth claims. This dynamics in the understanding of human experience brought a remarkable change in the philosophy of history. F.R.Ankersmit marks, "History is the first discipline that comes to mind if we think of disciplines attempting to give a truthful representation of a complex reality by means of a complex text" (F.R. Ankersmit)

The perception of history as a storehouse of the facts on past was reassessed in the light of the empirical analyses on the mechanics of language, mind and text. A new wave of theories on philosophy of history brought with it a novel and realist understanding of history. Owing to its

textual form, history was completely stripped of its glory, authority over and claims to truth and objectivity.

The widely prevalent discussions on history as narrative and narrative in history (by Hayden White especially) deferred the proximity between historical reality and objective truth. Narrativity had come to be realized as the Achilles heel of history. Along such lines of thought, Maurice Halbwach's 'collective/ cultural memory' and Pierre Nora's memory spaces and *'lieux de memoire' (*sites of memory) further intensified the dissolution of history as the medium of the reality of past.

According to Nora, history, on the fabric of narrative, sidelined the specific and essential human experience involved in the event that it depicted or documented. Memory is the most essential of human experiences that had been obliterated by history; "We speak so much of memory because there is so little of it left." (Nora 7). In the process of historicization of human experience, memory is marginalized. Memories are forgotten and unrecognized. The over-powering importance assumed by events like the World Wars or Cold War or Independence of colonies or ethnic wars (in the way they are historicized) underplay or erase the memories of the individuals who went through such events, bearing the brunt of violence and losing such essentialities of their former lives, that the trauma leaves them as ghosts of their former selves. All that they are left with is the memories of the happier past, the trauma of their present and a hapless future of which they have no hopes left. One rarely comes across the truth about such experience in history. Memory and history of the same event diverge with a lapse in between. Pierre Nora remarks on this difference as:

> The "acceleration of history" then, confronts us with the brutal realization of the difference between real memory−social and unviolated, exemplified in but also retained as the secret of so-called primitive or archaic societies−and history which is how our hopelessly forgetful modern societies, propelled by change, organize the past… (Nora 8)

Salman Rushdie's *Shalimar the Clown* (2005) could be called a novel of memory as it captures the memories of the victims of political conflicts across the world, projecting the *present* (which will eventually become their 'happier past') of the people slipping into a *memoryless* history. Kashmir, which had been the battleground of the fabled dynasties of the past and the political interests of the leaders of India and Pakistan at the wake of their independence, is the backdrop of *Shalimar the Clown*.

Rushdie's narrative revels in the beauty of Kashmir, he speaks of it as Eden, the paradise. In its natural beauty as well as in the happy, harmonious lives of its people, Kashmir opens out with joy and innocence. The novel, centred upon the lives of the people of Pachigam, a fictional village with its 'pine forests, chinar tree, the high flower-strewn meadow of Khelmarg, and 'a talkative little river, the Muskadoon, whose name meant 'refreshing'' represent any village of Kashmir. Pachigam is the garden of Eden of the Paradise Kashmir, the Kashmir before the onset of political unrest and violence inflicted by the army personnel as well as the terrorists. The people of Pachigam represent the innocence and harmony of the times before the outbreak of conflicts. The love between the two teenagers Boonyi Kaul (a hindu brahmin) and Shalimar (a muslim actor), and its acceptance by both their parents (Abdullah, the village head and Pyeralal, a Hindu Pandit) illustrate the harmony Kashmir had had in the past. Rushdie reiterates this point as Shalimar thinks over his love for a Hindu girl:

> The words *Hindu* and *Muslim* had no place in their story, he told himself. In the valley these words, were merely descriptions not divisions. The frontier between the words, their hard edges, had grown smudged and blurred. This was how things had to be. This was Kashmir. (SC 57)

It is a bitter irony that Kashmir, torn by the conflicts with communal roots has a past where communal harmony had been a living reality. Abdullah, Shalimar's father dismisses the discomfiture of the villagers over the love between Boonyi and Shalimar: "Abdullah then mentioned *Kasmiriyat*, Kashmiriness, the belief that at the heart of Kashmiri culture there was a common bond that transcended all other differences. (SC 110)

Pachigam is portrayed by Rushdie as the home of two rich art forms of Kashmir, the art of theatre and cookery. The comic players called the *bhand pathers* and the cooks of the traditional thrity-six course banquet *wazwaan* are the identities of Pachigam and its neighbouring village Shirmal.

The players, bands of Pachigam master the art of cooking and present a twin display of both forms in the Shalimar Gardens:

> Today our Muslim village, in the service of our Hindu maharaja, will cook and act in a Mughal−that is to say Muslim−garden, to celebrate the anniversary of the day on which Ram marched against Ravan to rescue Sita. What is more, two plays are to be performed: our traditional *Ram Leela*, and also *Budsha*, the tale of a Muslim sultan. Who tonight are

> the Hindus? Who are the Muslims? Here in Kashmir, our stories sit happily side by side on the same double bill, we eat from the same dishes, we laugh at the same jokes. (SC 71)

It is this reality of the past that Rushdie tries to revisit in *Shalimar the Clown*. He says the wide-spread ignorance about what Kashmiris went through in their war-torn land, is what urged him to write the novel on Kashmir. Kashmir had been a bone of contention ever since the ancient times. But the three-way torments from the *jihadists*, Pakistani army and Indian army had disfigured the beautiful Kashmir totally. The lives of the Kashmiris are at stake because they are unaware of who is fighting against them and who should they defend themselves from. A similar fate is meted out by many ethnic groups in different parts of the world. *Shalimar the Clown* has many characters and events dispersed in different zones of time and space; almost all the characters face the same problems as the Kashmiris. Max Ophuls, who sets forth the fall of the love of Boonyi and Shalimar, is a French-American who had barely survived the atrocities of the Nazi regime in Strasbourg and Alsace. He exploits Boonyi's ambition to take-off from the small village as Pachigam, and become a professional dancer, and steals her away from Kashmir and her dear ones. She has a daughter by him, and is forced by Max's legal wife to leave her daughter with her and go back alone to Kashmir. Boonyi's return to Kashmir reveals many more shocking turns in her life. Her family had ritually declared her death, and Shalimar by now is filled with a murderous revenge against her, to escape which she takes refuge in the Gujar hut (believed to be the shelter of Nazarébadoor, a prophetess) in the wooded hill. Meanwhile the reign of terror attacks Pachigam on all sides and announces the death of that heavenly Kashmir, leaving Abdullah, Pyerala, Firdaus (Shalimar's mother) and Anees (Shalimar's brother) dead, among many innocent people. Shalimar joins the fundamentalist groups and becomes a terrorist. Later he becomes Max's chauffeur and avenges his wounded self by killing Max in California and Boonyi in the Gujar hut. Jailed in California for murdering Max, the diplomat, Shalimar escapes. The novel ends with an encounter between India-turned Kashmira, Boonyi's daughter and Shalimar, both of whom have vowed to kill the other.

The outstanding feature of the novel is that the passage of the lives of the victims of violence from a happier past to a miserably fatal present is captured through the concept of memory, as against the superficial interpretation of such events as "ethnic cleansing" in the records of history.

The novel substantiates the polarity of memory and history, right from its epigraph – a quote by the Kashmiri Poet Aghar Shahid Ali:

"I am everything you lost. You won't forgive me.

My memory keeps getting in the way of your history" (SC 1)

A nation and its people when narrated in history become a sequence of events as organized by the determinant ideology and power of the times. In the process of historicization of the past 'the historic sensibility' (Nora 7) overpowers the essential human experience of those who went through the ruthless changes of time. When the human experience is one of trauma, loss and death then what history does to human experience is no less brutal than murder. "Memory and history, far from being synonymous, appear now to be in fundamental opposition." (Nora 8)

Max Ophuls, the Ambassador who ruins the marriage of Boonyi and Shalimar leading their lives into treachery and murder, had worked briefly as a forger of papers and paintings, in Strasbourg and Paris to earn a living and to navigate people across borders guarded by Nazi soldiers. He feels his talent as a forger would surely get him a job in writing history, which he believed was his forte: "History, which was his true métier, the real profession to which he would devote his life, would for a time value his skills as a faker above his talents in other fields." (SC140)

The suggestion that history could 'value' the skill for fakery is just one of the hints in *Shalimar the Clown* that prove Nora's notions on history. Nora feels that the abstract and secular nature of history gives itself up to alter the reality of past, housed by memory; "History's goal and ambition is not to exalt but to annihilate what has in reality taken place." (Nora 9) The only way one could know the reality of Kashmir's past in the times of trouble, is through the memories of the people who went through it.

Rushdie's *Shalimar the Clown* is a unification of all such memories, memories not only of the troubled times but also of the happier past. In any retelling of the reality of Kashmiris, there are possibilities of the memories getting lost in the interpretations. Rushdie's intention in writing *Shalimar the Clown* is to clear "the widespread ignorance concerning the "tragedy of Kashmir", hoping, with his book" and "to be able to draw attention to this troubled and war-torn region."

Abdullah the chieftain of Pachigam and a veteran actor, just before the performance of his play *Budshah*, revels in the beauty of Shalimar, the Mughal garden in Kashmir; which makes Shalimar a site of memory, the reincarnation proper of the memories of Kashmir and Shalimar:

> The magic of the garden began to take hold. Paradise too was a garden−Gulistan, Jannat, Eden−and here before him was its mirror on earth. He had always loved Mughal gardens of Kashmir, Nishat,Chashma Shahi, and above all Shalimar, and to perform there had been his lifelong dream. The present maharaja was no Mughal emperor, but Abullah's imagination could easily change that, and as he stood at the centre of the central terrace and directed his people to their posts, as the theatre troupe went off to the highest terrace to build the stage for the performance of *Budshah*, while the chefs' brigade headed for the kitchen tents and began the interminable work of chopping, slicing, frying and boiling, the sarpanch closed his eyes and conjured up the long-dead creator of this wonderland of swaying trees, liquid terraces and water music, the horticulturist monarch for whom the earth was the beloved and such gardens were his verdant love-songs to it. Abdullah drifted towards a trancelike state in which he felt himself being transformed into that dead kind, Jehangir the Encompasser of the Earth. (SC 78)

Later when he starts playing his part as the Budshah, he becomes Jehangir:

> There were times when Abdullah's powers of autosuggestion frightened his fellow actors. When he unleashed them he could, or so it seemed, resurrect the dead to inhabit his living flesh, an occultist fear far more impressive, but also more alarming than mere performance. Now, as on all occasions, the players of Pachigam brought his wife Firdaus to his side, to talk him back from the past. "The times are growing so dark," he told her distantly, "that we must try as best we can to cling to the memory of brightness." (SC 79)

This portent of the growing dark times comes true and is marked by the last theatrical performance by the bhands of Pachigam, as there are demonstrations of the liberation front, the crowded army personnel and the impending fear of the attack of the jihadists, outside the hall:

> The pounding drumbeats echoed around them, the chanting of the demonstrators was like a chorus crying doom, the menace of the ever-growing crowd crackled around the empty seats like an electric charge. Still the bhands of Pachigam went on with their show, dancing, singing, clowning, telling their tale of old-time tolerance and hope. (SC 282)

Almost all the characters get into a 'trancelike' reliving of the past like Abdullah, as they sense the loss of grip with their paradise, their happier past filled with peace. These trancelike transpositions into the Edenic days, is where Nora locates the *le lieux mémoire* (sites of memory). These sites of memories are the places, sites and causes where "memory crystallizes and secrets itself" (Nora 7). Boonyi's exile in the Gujar hut, on the wooded hill, is such a transposition, where

she awaits her death for the third time. The lingering memories of her mother, her friends, her husband and her childhood remembrance of her father rearing their sheep and goats, is her way of holding onto the sites of memories, which no more have a life in the actuality of the horrific events that goes on in Pachigam, as she awaits her husband Shalimar to come and avenge his dishonor.

The onset of extremism and violence in Kashmir marks a split, "a break with the past". When the present slips into the past, it *becomes* history, it is historicized, when it is historicized there is no more memory, one is left with "the sites of memory"; "Memory is a perpetually actual phenomenon, a bond tying us to the eternal present; history is a representation of the past." (Nora 8)

Just as historicizing individual memories leads to its dilution and disintegration, intrusion from outside collapses the life of the natives of Kashmir and Strasbourg alike. Max Ophuls' home Strasbourg is as beautiful as Kashmir;

> In the city of Strasbourg, a place of charming old quarters and pleasant public gardens, near the charming old parc des Contades around the corner from the old synagogue on what is now the rue du Grand Rabin René Hirschler, at the heart of a lovely and fashionable neighbourhood peopled by delightful and charming fold, there stood the ample and, yes, undeniably charming mansion house, *a petit palais* of the Belle Époque in which Ambassador Maximilian Ophuls, a man framed for possessing what a newspaper editorialist once described as "dangerous, possibly even lethal qualities" of charm, grew up in a family of highly cultured Ashkenazi Jews. (SC 137)

The outbreak of the Nazis brutalizing Jews in Strasbourg leaves the city, close to nothing.

> Strasbourg had become a ghost town, its streets ragged with absences. It was still charming, naturally, with its medieval half-timberings, its covered bridges, its pleasing aspects and riverside parks. As he prowled the largely deserted alleys of the Petite France district, the future Ambassador Ophuls told himself, "It's as if everyone went away for August, and any day now it will be time for *la rentrée* and the place will be bustling again." But in order to believe that one had to ignore the broken windows, the evidence of looting, the feral dogs in the streets, many of them abandoned pets driven insane by abandonment. One had to ignore the ruination of one's own life." (SC 145)

Just as Abdullah and Boonyi hold on to the memory spaces, Ophuls' parents Max senior and Anya Ophuls stay in their house:

> The exodus began on September 1, 1939; one hundred and twenty thousand Strasbourgeois became refugees in the Dordogne and the Indre. The Ophuls family did not leave, although their household staff disappeared overnight without giving notice, silently fleeing the exterminating angel, just as Kashmiri palace servitors would abandon the royal Dassehra banquet in the Shalimar gardens eight years later. The workers at the printing presses also began to desert their posts. (SC 141-142)

In Kashmir, when Boonyi's daughter India-turned-Kashmira visits Kashmir, she gets to see a ruinous version of what once was a heaven on earth:

> The village of Shirmal, like most places in the valley, had been stricken by the twin disease of poverty and fear, that double epidemic which was wiping out the old way of life. The decaying houses seemed actually to be built of poverty, the unrepaired rooftops of poverty, the unhinged windows of poverty, the broken steps of poverty, the empty kitchens of poverty and the joyless beds. (SC 364)

Kashmira comes in search of her mother but only gets to know her tale, and visits the sites her mother was moving around as a young dancer and lover:

> She did not know her mother but she learned her mother's places, her sites of love and death. The meadow glowed yellow in the long-shadowed late afternoon light. She saw her mother there, running with the man she loved, the man who loved her, she saw them tumble and kiss. To love was to risk your life she thought… Her mother had stepped towards love, defying convention, and it had cost her dearly. (SC 368)

Just as Kashmira treasures the sites of her mother's love and death, Max rebuilds the memory space of his parents' ancestral house with its study, a recreation of his father's printing press Art &Aventure, which had been ruined by the Nazi soldiers:

> When he saw flames licking at Art & Aventure the fear began pounding in him, kneading him like dough. Long before he reached home he knew what he would find, the broken door, the wanton damage,… In the library with the three desks the destruction was very great, the books scattered and torn, a mound of them burned in the middle of the rug, a great charred heap of wisdom that somebody had pissed on to put it out. (SC 157)

Later India, Max's daughter describes the study in Max's house in California:

> Max's study was a somber anomaly in this house of colour and light: wood panelled, with heavy European couches and mahogany tables, its shelves lined with books printed long ago by Art & Aventure, a Belle Ĕpoque movie set of a room designed to echo another long-lost room, his father's library in Strasbourg: more a memory than a place. (SC 351-352)

The bhand stage for Abdullah, the waza kitchen for Pyeralal, Pachigam itself for Boonyi, the tainted love for Shalimar, Kashmir for India-turned Kashmira and Art &Aventure for Max are all the sites of memory that they strive to preserve and sanctify as the remembrance of their past, whose end had set forth the genesis of so many alternate realities of their lives and their space. "Memory takes root in the concrete, in spaces, gestures, images, and objects; history binds itself strictly to temporal continuities, to progressions and to relations between things. Memory is absolute, while history can only conceive the relative." (Nora 9)

What history misses out from documenting are the memories of the people of their happier past that lives only in their heart and soul. Their alternate realities will be known as history with no traces of their memories; "History because it is an intellectual and secular phenomenon, calls for analysis and criticism. Memory installs remembrance within the sacred; history, always prosaic, releases it again." (Nora 9)

Fettered by the ephemeral nature of human mind and mortality of human life these memories wander in search of a medium to live on. The far cry of memory to find an expression to survive through the debris of violence inflicted by events and later by history, leaks through those liminal spaces, which Pierre Nora calls '*le lieux de memoire*', 'sites of memory'.

When memory is obliterated by its twisted representations in history, memory ceases to survive as memory and take the form of sites of memory. Pachigam is a site of memory in this sense. Although it is fictional, Rushdie's artistry has recreated the memory of the Kashmiris of a happier past, who lived through the heydays of Kashmir and saw it fall into pieces right before their eyes. Its depiction as a village full of zest, joy and delight for life, in the past, is both a utopian picture of Kashmir and a symbol of the yearning and nostalgia of the Kashmiris whose beautiful life had been disfigured by the infiltration from within the country and outside.

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