

SHALIMAR, THE EX-CENTRIC: RUSHDIE READS MILTON THROUGH DERRIDA

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■ **ABSTRACT:** There is a murder and the murderer is the ambassador's Kashmiri chauffeur and his name is Shalimar the Clown. How does this sweet-natured clown become a killer? With this overall plot in mind, the present essay articulates these ex-centric, unusual, and uncanny figurations in relation to John Milton's *Paradise Lost* with a view also to discussing Jacques Derrida's notion of *destinerrance* as a possible alternative to literary influence and as a further elaboration on intertextuality in general. The essay examines what sorts of religious, literary, philosophical, and/or mythical references appear throughout the novel and resonate to the epic poem. In brief, the clown turned murderer can and ought to be related to the Fall and its outcomes.

■ **KEYWORDS:** Rushdie. Intertextuality. Fiction. Influence.

There are various analytical means by which scholars and critics customarily discuss, explain, and evaluate literary works. Depending on the precise circumstances of author, culture, and the kind of work in focus, one critical approach may be more particularly relevant and valuable than others. I confess that my own predilections are quite definitely derridean and are in the area of what is commonly called post-structuralist criticism. I believe that however else one may wish to dissect, analyze or evaluate a work of literature, one must first understand it as enmeshed in its own history of be-coming, in its own non-essential singularity.¹ The work of literature in question is Salman Rushdie's 2005 novel *Shalimar the clown*.

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¹ I refer here to Jacques Derrida's (1992, p.47) view of the institution called literature: "If there is no such thing as literature – i.e., self-identity of the literary thing – if what is announced or promised as literature never gives itself as such, that means, among other things, that a literature that talked only about literature or a work that was purely self-referential would immediately be annulled. You'll say that that's maybe what's happening. In which case it is this experience of the nothing-ing of nothing that interests our desire under the name of literature. Experience of Being, nothing less, nothing more, on the edge of metaphysics, literature perhaps stands on the edge of everything, almost beyond everything, including itself. It's the most interesting thing in the world, maybe more interesting than the world, and this is why, if it has no definition, what is heralded and refused under the name of literature cannot be identified with any other discourse."

In *The New Yorker* book review (2005) of Rushdie's novel, titled *Paradises lost*, John Updike stated: "James Joyce and T. S. Eliot established brainy allusions as part of modernity's literary texture, but at the risk of making the author's brain the most vital presence on the page". Following Updike's assessment of the novel, this essay elaborates on those brainy allusions carried out in (post-)modernity's literary texture by proposing, with the aid of Jacques Derrida's notion of "destinerrance", that John Milton's *Paradise Lost* haunts Rushdie's brain, so to speak, and becomes a vital presence in the narrative as the author sketches the ruination of two natural paradises, California and Kashmir. Alongside the paradises lost, the essay also tackles the issue of ex-centricity, of the uncanny and the unusual, in the literary, ethical, and political discourses that run through the novel in the figure of the "iron mullah", a zealot literally made of metal, and in his speech inculcating warrior zealotry, which runs counter anything the West supposedly calls civilization.²

Keeping in mind that literature is not self-identical, but very much dependent on acts of reading, I feel the need to contextualize not only Updike's assessment of *Shalimar the clown* but also the novel itself in terms of their critical history of be-coming. While many critics and reviewers have focused on the novel's thematic dimension, a number of literary readers, academic or not, have attempted to analyze the intertextual or structuralizing aspects of *Shalimar the clown*. The first case is true of Harveen Mann (2007), who believes Rushdie's *Shalimar* "continues to engage with some of the most controversial narrative terrain in contemporary times: the rise of religious fundamentalism, the despoiling of the 'Paradise' of Kashmir, the modern-day geopolitical role of the United States, the making of global terrorism, and the oftentimes contentious flattening of the world".³ Nona Walia (2005) also sees Rushdie's *Shalimar* as having been inspired by themes as diverse as "Indian mythology, Los Angeles fakery and Hindu culture". Laurence Phelan (2006) corroborates the critical faith in thematic preeminence by stating that

in *Shalimar the clown* [Rushdie] comes as close as he's likely to in his novels to confronting the spectre of fundamentalism and global terrorism head on. But it is as much a novel about family, art, Western culture, folklore, post-colonial Indian and Pakistani history and politics, and, more than anything else, Rushdie's own dazzling intellect and wordplay.⁴

² See also interviews with Rushdie (1999, 2001a, 2001b, 2001c, 2002a, 2002b) on the issue of fundamentalism and Islam prior to *Shalimar the clown*.

³ Similarly, Mishra (2005) and Foley (2008) suggest that Rushdie uses Kashmir as his backdrop to explore the dark roots of terrorism. The novel then would move "from the Holocaust in France, to the jihadi training camps in Kashmir and the secret wars of the American government, going through the dark areas of world history".

⁴ Other readings of Rushdie's *Shalimar the clown* include: Chaudhuri (2009), Zucker (2008), Walter (2005), Demanski (2005), Freeman (2005), Derbyshire (2006), and Donahue (2005): "there is an epic sweep to *Shalimar*. Its almost 400 dense pages explore important and compelling issues. Among them:

Many of the accounts that link Rushdie's novel to theme and face-value narrative plot are also concerned with issues appertaining to style, genre, and moral forthrightness.⁵ Thus for Jason Cowley (2005) Rushdie writes "in several

World War II in Europe, the tragic partition of the Indian subcontinent, the continuing strife between those two countries, the rise of Islamic fundamentalism, the fractured ties of affection between parents and children, the deadly effect that American power and influence has on the Third World. Rushdie proves himself to be a master of the global novel".

⁵ The following readers and critics of Rushdie's *Shalimar the clown* are also judicious about presenting the novel's complex dimensions. Daniel (2007): "A recognition of the central importance of Kashmir to the text ... helps to ground the fantasy in a socially-committed vision and deliver Rushdie from the charge that his text advocates an uncritically universalist and free-floating doctrine of the freedom of speech"; Martins (2010, p.59): "Shalimar has a sense of self that clashes with the accepted wisdom on the motivations of modern jihadis and terrorists, according to which they are stripped of volition by means of indoctrination and promises of rewards in heaven. Shalimar is working on a really earthly, clear-cut, personal mission and he is never made to sound clownish or brainless anywhere in the novel ... the book does not justify his venom but merely acknowledges it and tries to locate and name it"; Boyagoda (2005): "The novel strains to establish the valley's fall from paradise as due to the collective actions of cross-border militias, the Indian army, Pakistani intelligence operatives, a mullah literally made of iron, and a womanizing American ambassador. These dark powers collectively wreak their religious, political, and military havoc on an otherwise paradisiacal valley through their private involvements with Pachigam's main actors, whose latent desires for fame, power, and vengeance are stirred up and turned destructive, on themselves and each other"; Press (2005): "In [...] *Shalimar the clown*, the lost Eden is Kashmir, that landlocked sliver of loveliness caught in a bloody geopolitical tug-of-war between Pakistan and India in the aftermath of independence from Britain in 1947. Intertwined with an overripe love story is another tale altogether: the history of a country corroded and soured by sectarian struggle, deteriorating from a lively playground of legends and folk art into a breeding ground for terrorism"; Barbash (2005): "What distinguishes 'Shalimar' is his masterful and timely depiction of how closely aligned hatred and love can be, how both are animating forces, and how a desire for vengeance can be cultivated patiently, even reverently within a culture or an individual, making it all the more destructive and immutable"; Campbell (2006): "*Shalimar the clown* [...] began life as a procedural thriller, and the bones of an international tale of suspense remain discernable behind the familiar torrent of history, allegory and topsy-turvy realism"; Saadi (2005): "His prose, like Kashmir, is an exquisite, broken thing of pain and beauty. In an earthy, poetic Sufism, he captures perfectly the existential intimacies between lovers and between people, song, dance and land. Rushdie adroitly skewers political hypocrisy and directly challenges the "killing field" juggernaut of Indian state power. On the other side, the nightmarish golem of the "iron mullah", fattened on US-Pakistani state militarism, shifts the Kashmiri rebel consciousness from liberatory nationalism to jihadist apocalypse"; Ghanshyam (2008, p.83): "It is not only fundamentalism or extremism which proves to be detrimental for life and country; nationalism can also endanger life and freedom when taken in the stringent sense concerning itself only with selfish aim of possession and power. Bound in these twin chains, and individual loses all, identity, liberty and life. The furies unleashed by their combined powers create only havoc and destruction wherever they exist"; and Mullan (2005): "There has always been an odd innocence about Salman Rushdie's novels. His satire is obvious, his allusions are unrestrained; he revels in his digressions [...] His narrative voice allows for sarcastic interjection or delighted hyperbole. He does not flinch from telling rather than showing. He openly fashions his plots to accommodate the issues that he cares about".

different registers, [he] combines the wonder of fairy tale with the grittiness of hard, political realism; at times, especially in the long section recounting Max's wartime experiences, it reads as something close to reheated journalism". And according to Jason Charles (2005), "a subtler expression of the world's integrated condition, though, is Rushdie's literary dexterity, his ability to cast sections of this novel as different genres. Modern thriller, Ramayan epic, courtroom drama, slapstick comedy, wartime adventure, political satire, village legend – they're all blended here". Although varying greatly in tone and focus, Adam Kirsch's (2005) take on *Shalimar* revolves around "the novel's moral forthrightness [...] The only thing resembling an explanation for fanaticism, in 'Shalimar the clown,' is sexual frustration".

It is generally taken for granted that Rushdie establishes a dialogue with the literary tradition and with some specific authors. Cécile Leonard (2006), for instance, concocts her views on *Shalimar* by making reference also to the novels of V. S. Naipaul and concludes that both "offer ethical readings of terrorism and globalization. In particular, the narratives amount to constantly striving to bring the irrational back within the circle of reason [...] satirizing the ideological rhetoric of terrorists [...] and claiming the possibility of abode and belonging in a global world". The emphasis on literary tradition and on how Rushdie structures his novels in relation to specific authors of the Anglophone world can be perceived in Delia Falconer's (2005) assumptions about *Shalimar*:

Rushdie is addicted to complication. His writing, with its Scheherazade-like unspooling of stories within stories, has always homed in on the seismic ruptures that empires leave in their wake. This is *Romeo and Juliet* played out against the post-colonial history of Kashmir... [the novel's] thriller-ish opening and conclusion ... have a pared-down style reminiscent of DeLillo. Instead of storytelling itself, this time Rushdie appears to have chosen as his grand theme the intimacy of hate.

Another such view is shared by Theo Tait (2005), but now the stress falls on the degeneration of style and the exhaustion of structuring devices:

With time and overuse, artistic style degenerates into mannerism. This is especially true of magic realism [...] The other problem with the style is its tendency to degenerate into a cosy and narrowly illustrative form of fiction, full of operatic clichés: passionate lovers, wise old women, tyrannical patriarchs – a sort of politically correct fairytale. [...] Rushdie is partly labouring under the strong and difficult influence of Don DeLillo. He exhibits a DeLillo-ish concern with the limousine-borne power-brokers who shape our world, and the secret networks that underlie it. Like many of DeLillo's characters, Max is given to essayistic fugues on modern America, uttered in a spirit of "half-humorous perversity".

In spite of their somewhat diverging interpretations, what Leonard, Falconer, and Tait share is the assumption that Rushdie's *Shalimar* stems from literature's power in, or right to, being self-referential, but not in absolute terms.

Yet once more, what is announced or promised as literature never gives itself as such. Matt Thorne's (2005) argument rests in part on the failure to understand such deception and so he gauges the novel by using terms like authorial voice, displaced judgement, and final joke:

Given that Rushdie's authorial voice is so rich, and that he reveals his aesthetic interests in almost every sentence, it must be his deliberate decision to refrain from hinting which of his unsympathetic characters he stands closest behind. In denying the reader this knowledge, he turns his novel into a closed system [...] And in lieu of judgement, Rushdie's final, best (and very Nabokovian) joke seems to be that there is no better punishment for a multiple murderer driven by honour than to be the star of a novel written by an author who doesn't care for him.

So long as failure (in sympathizing with characters) is concerned, Joy Press (2005), another of Rushdie's readers, seem to be caught up in the meshes of what is announced and promised in *Shalimar* and not necessarily on what seems to be accomplished in the novel: "Rushdie's fiction holds up a warped mirror to real life, in all its absurdity and awfulness. *Shalimar the Clown* does that to some extent [...] Even more than usual, the characters seem allegorical, passion-play placeholders for the grand ideas and currents buffeting the world. The result is an honorable failure, a garbled book for garbled times". There is no denying that Rushdie's fiction is akin to the act of sifting – a separating out of very porous elements, a sorting out what is useful and valuable, a scattering of themes and devices on the fabric of his texts, or even, as I will show later on in this essay, a falling through –, but it is scarcely associated with the removal of impurities of any sort.

In order to continue with my inquiry it is necessary to examine how Updike sees the novel: "The plot of 'Shalimar the clown', beneath the tinsel and the outrage, the Hindu and Bollywood mythmaking, the jittery verbal razzmatazz, is as simple as a legend. It hinges on an impetuous vow". We go back again to the idea of literature being a promise, a kind of vow, that is marked by a passion, and, according to Derrida (1995, p.31),⁶ every passion is a critical position(ing). *Shalimar the clown* opens with an account of a murder. A former American ambassador to India has his throat knifed open on the door-step of his daughter's home in Los Angeles. The murderer is the ambassador's Kashmiri chauffeur and his name is Shalimar the clown. Shalimar's nemesis is Ophuls's daughter, India. India was the by-product of the short-lived romance between Max Ophuls and Shalimar's wife, Boonyi Kaul.

⁶ See also Derrida's *Passions*.

The most pressing aspect of Rushdie's novel is Shalimar himself: how does this sweet-natured clown become a killer? The metamorphosis occurs off-stage while the novel tells of Max's history and Boonyi's fall from grace. The plot is after all hinged on an impetuous vow, a vow that is marked by force and violence of movement and action. That is not of primary concern here since the point I am pursuing is to work out whether Milton's *Paradise lost* haunts Rushdie's brain in *Shalimar the clown* as a consequence to the multilayered and pluri-faceted allusions carried out in (post-)modernity's literary texture.

Herein lies the most problematic aspect of my working thesis in this essay: it is a haunting and it is marked by an absence more than an actual presence. Furthermore, Rushdie's (authorial) voice is shape-shifting:

Rushdie's own writing is populated by diverse voices. His heterogeneous influences range widely from writers like Kipling to Desani to Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Gunter Grass. There are, in fact, many Rushdies. Should we not be more discriminating when we treat that name as a fixed highway sign on a giant board saying "Bombay" or "London" or "New York"? [...]. [Rushdie] writes to reclaim what he has lost and one way to do this is to introduce his own creations into the momentous flux of the past (KUMAR, 2005).

Amitava Kumar serves me perfectly here, for heterogeneous influences and reclaiming losses are the issues under consideration. To view *Shalimar* in this way, I believe, is to recover and necessarily to redefine the connections between the epic and the novel not in terms of literary influence, but, as I will show, these connections need to be regarded in terms of *destinerrance*.

This term is used by the Franco-Algerian philosopher, Jacques Derrida (2005, p.89), in *Paper machine* and points to the untenable line of a possible decision to interpret the name, memory, tradition, and to the impossible decision of interpretation as a means of closure, fixity, exclusion. The term *destinerrance*, I now propose, comprises also the following notions: a set of texts supposedly fatal, linked by a burden, concocted by fate and pointing to an end whose design is incomplete; that which one inherits (critically), that which is transmitted in the name that becomes memory and this same memory becoming tradition (of a poetics); the texts that wander, err, follow different paths by chance and in an uncertain way. *Destinerrance*, as I now read it, unites under one heading destiny, inheritance, and errancy.

If Rushdie's fiction is akin to the act of sifting, a falling, as if through a sieve, Milton's *Paradise lost*, I now propose, is the text that works as the sieve. What the epic purported was to justify the ways of God to men, and on his way to doing so, Milton managed to tackle the existence of Good and Evil, the translating process after the Fall (the need to translate evil in terms of good),

and the possibility of being-at-home in the world. These three elements are also constituent parts of the overall scheme of Rushdie's *Shalimar the clown*: with the entrance of fundamentalism and zealotry in the multicultural, tolerant, paradisiacal Kashmir, the villagers were at a loss as how to translate this evil into the language of good. To make matters worse, powerful "demons" were at play: should Kashmiris side with India or Pakistan, or should Boonyi give vent to her need of autonomy and take Max Ophuls, recently appointed US ambassador to India and visitor to paradise (Kashmir), as lover, or should Shalimar feel resentful of Boonyi's breaking of her vow or should him lend his ear to the iron mullah and metamorphose into a terrorist cum cuckold? Adding to these rhetorical questions, one more crucial critical interrogation is at hand: "are we really to accept uncomplainingly the fact that everything Rushdie says here about the violence in Kashmir finds its apotheosis only in a bloody honor killing?" (KUMAR, 2005). The answer to the last question is "no" and the reason is to be found again in Milton's *Paradise lost* as sieve.

What I want to emphasize here is that Rushdie's *Shalimar* forges, simultaneously, continuities and discontinuities with *Paradise lost* and that both can be summed up under the notion of *destinerrance*. In the case above, we may think of textual errancy, that capacity every text has to circulate randomly, to plight as a mirror of our (authors' and readers') fickle state, and to reach our ears disjointed, surviving its journey only as brainy allusions which form part of (post-)modernity's literary texture. Again, it is Milton, in *Paradise lost*, who creates an epic that "looks upon biblical text as parallel rather than unique scripture; and his own writing, in exposing the sacred unverifiability of the Bible, associates itself with that eternally unfalsifiable state" (POOLE, 2005, p.194). "Thus, when challenging the principle 'man cannot win grace (because his fall was so cataclysmic)'" (POOLE, 2005, p.196) or man can win grace (and so his fall was not really a failure), Milton's *Paradise lost* shows us that there is not an easy answer to the idea of the fall.

When Rushdie, for instance, became interested in Milton and the paradises lost, he found that the unfalsifiable state could only be imagined in contemporaneity in the form of a novel, and a novel that could surely complicate further and further the reasons for, and consequences of, a fall. For this reason, to ask questions such as how Rushdie responds to the idea of a fall, be this fall related to Kashmir or Los Angeles, is to miss the point completely. Rushdie, as Milton before him, does not know the answer. In folding his action in *Shalimar the clown*, Rushdie invokes Milton, as well as Romeo and Juliet, Genesis, and the ancient Indian epic The Ramayana, with expected postmodern renovations. As Randy Boyagoda (2005) has put it, "more significantly, [the novel] opens onto a wider issue, addressing the difficulties of symmetry and asymmetry that come up when we try to comprehend

those distant, long-running problems whose convulsions can affect us with unprecedented immediacy” I believe Boyagoda refers here to the problems that accompany any idea of a fall.

Symmetry and asymmetry, in political and theological terms, haunt Rushdie’s mind and inform his novel in close proximity. The “destinerrant” text concerned with symmetry and asymmetry, before Rushdie’s *Shalimar*, is definitely Milton’s *Paradise lost*: Man was created (a)symmetrically perfect: “Sufficient to have stood, though free to fall” (MILTON, 1977, p.291). The creature was simultaneously balanced in proportion, corresponding to God’s perfection, but also showed the property of variance under change, the tendency to orient itself in space and to direct itself following the flow/flux of time. As Erik Spanberg (2005) curiously remarks, “*Shalimar the clown* isn’t a story. Rather, as the movie people describe such segments, it is back story. Rushdie’s cinematic tale begins where all movies begin: in Los Angeles”. Under this perspective, we may think of *Paradise lost* as the story of *Shalimar the clown* and the novel as the story that tells what led up to the main plot (as of a film). Again, we see Rushdie renovating the epic by scripting new roles to be played by new actors (we shall not forget that *Shalimar* is a tightrope-walking actor), we see him refurbishing the long poem with the post-modern focus on reeling time, we see him recreating the human experience of the “nothing-ing of nothing that interests our desire under the name of literature” (DERRIDA, 1992, p.47) without falling prey to essentialisms or moral judgements.

From the previous discussion, it is apparent that Rushdie’s fiction has nothing to do with the oddness of innocence, and much to do with ex-centricity. Also like Milton before him, Rushdie is unrestrained in his allusions and revels in digressions. The allusions and digressions serve him well: they place him out of the center, for there is not a center any longer, but simply uncanny central positions (and passions if we are to use a word dear to Derrida). His hyperbolic delight, again just like in Milton, can be seen to materialize in the novel as a zealot literally made of metal, an iron mullah. Such a cartoon figure is comparable to Milton’s Satan, the equivalent overstated character personifying evil for the seventeenth-century readers of the epic. If Milton was not being too harsh on his seventeenth-century readers, as I believe he was not taking the place of a puritan elect and preaching from high on the pulpit about matters of salvation, then Rushdie, Milton’s responsible heir in our contemporary world, is not writing self-help manuals for the bold, the powerful, and the posh. Also, Rushdie is not being too demanding on his readers when he asks them to follow him and appreciate what he does best: literature. The figure of the iron mullah in *Shalimar the clown*, like the Satan of *Paradise lost*, runs counter anything the West supposedly calls civilization. If we take, of course, civilization to mean the stage of cultural development at which writing and the keeping of written records is attained, then, just like literature (democracy included), they should

stand “on the edge of everything, almost beyond everything, including itself” (DERRIDA, 1992, p.47). Post-modern literature, and that is what Rushdie writes, accommodates to nothing and remains, (a)symmetrically, a promise.

SÁ, L. F. F. Shalimar, o ex-cêntrico: Rushdie lê Milton por meio de Derrida. **Itinerários**, Araraquara, n. 37, p.97-109, Jul./Dez., 2013.

■ **RESUMO:** *Há um assassinato e o assassino é o motorista do embaixador americano na Caxemira e o seu nome é Shalimar, o palhaço. Como pode um palhaço de natureza amena se tornar um assassino? Com esse enredo em mente, este artigo pretende elaborar tais figuras ex-cêntricas, inusuais e insólitas em relação ao poema épico de John Milton, O paraíso perdido, e com vistas a discutir a noção derridiana de destinerrância como uma possível alternativa à influência literária e como uma elaboração mais detalhada em torno da intertextualidade. Este artigo também examina quais tipos de referências religiosas, literárias, filosóficas e/ou míticas aparecem no romance e reverberam no poema épico. Em resumo, o palhaço assassino de Rushdie pode e deve ser relacionado à Queda e suas consequências.*

■ **PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** *Rushdie. Intertextualidade. Ficção. Influência.*

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Recebido em 12/12/2012

Aceito para publicação em 27/07/2013



