

# Motherland domains: changing female portrayals in salman rushdie's works essay sa...

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## Introduction

From the perspective of the reader, Salman Rushdie is infamous for having written *The Satanic Verses*. Among the literary critics, however, the author is perhaps most famous for writing *Midnight's Children*. Indeed, much of Rushdie criticism is centered upon this postcolonial, and some would stress, postmodern work. Influenced by characterizations of “Third-World” literature as national allegory attributed to Frederic Jameson, many critics have written about *Midnight's* narrator, Saleem Sinai, as representing post-colonial India as a paradoxically fragmented whole. Just as Saleem's identity is depicted as too complex, too conflicting to hold together well, so too is India's national identity viewed as significantly troubled: any suggestion of unity could only be fictional.

This paper primarily focuses on Rushdie's built landscapes associated with mother figures. Mothers are perceived as both ineffectual and threatening (embodying the “monstrous feminine”). In either case, this paper argues that landscapes associated with maternal figures arouse (Western, internalized) subcontinental male fears of entrapment and compromised masculine identity. Ultimately, this paper claims that Rushdie's female domains represent the motherlands of India and Pakistan which must be rejected by Rushdie's protagonists who believe doing so will free them to assume an empowered position within (Western) patriarchy. This loyalty to patriarchy over motherland/homeland reveals the breach—noted by feminist critics—between Rushdie's claims to feminist ideals and his greater loyalties to (a) transnational patriarchy.

## The Threatening Realms of Mothers, Grandmothers, and Wives

Nishapur, the vast and hermetic mansion in *Shame* and purported microcosm of Pakistan, is an oppressively female landscape ruled in coalition and literal sisterhood by three matriarchs, the Shakil sisters. Despite its actual or perceived size, Nishapur is claustrophobic for Omar Khayyam Shakil who is frustrated by his inability to determine the identity of his father (an English colonial) and mother (one of the sisters). This lack of an identifiable father, insufficiently compensated for by the presence of three mothers, results in the protagonist's self-perception as an insubstantial being: just the mirror of a ghost (287). In contrast, the imposing qualities of his mothers—"strong-chinned, powerfully built, purposefully striding and of an almost oppressively charismatic force" (12)—further stifles his self-respect.

The enclosed world of Nishapur, flouting the values and power dynamics of a patriarchy, is perceived as dystopic by the young, male protagonist. The maternal mansion closes off the "outer worlds of 'male-defined' and therefore safe society" Grace 194), and the result of imagining himself beyond the salvation of a functional (and one might claim Western/metropolitan) patriarchy fills Omar Khayyam with anxiety if not dread. He fears "living at the edge of the world, so close that he might fall off" (14-15). Later, as an adult, he still cannot defend himself against "the worst of all his nightmares," brought on by his early years in Nishapur, which is visually epitomized by the "gaping mouth of the void" (284).

The anxiety of having one's masculine identity voided by a power-hungry female, domain, or landscape is a recurring theme in Rushdie's novels. Even the city of Bombay, about which the author waxes nostalgic in *Midnight's Children*, is at one point characterized as a hungry, consuming mother feeding off the most talented of India's children (142). The city is named after the Hindu goddess Mumbadevi, and in anthropomorphizing Bombay as a threatening mother Rushdie is, perhaps in the vein of other artists, evoking Hinduism's terrifying goddesses—above all, Kali (after whom Calcutta is named)—who “provide images of strong women to accompany the more familiar image of the nurturant woman” (Bulbeck 143).

The consuming mother reappears in *Moor*, when Aurora Zogoiby says, flatly: “We all eat children. . . . If not other people's, then our own” (125). Just as menacing, Aurora's grandmother Epifania was described as “swallowing the news of her husband Francisco's death without a tremor. She ate his death as she had eaten his life; and grew” (*Moor* 24). The ability of this grandmother to suck the life out of her surroundings is reflected in the renewed vitality permeating the landscape of the family estate after her death: the sunlight became brighter, the lawns grew more luxuriant, and the insects disappeared.

Epifania is much like the mustachioed Naseem Aziz, grandmother of Saleem Sinai in *Midnight's Children*, who “grew larger and stronger” as the health of her doctor husband deteriorated (314). Saleem compares his grandmother, in her younger days, to the mythical succubi who, after ensnaring men, “regain their true, awful aspect and begin to swallow their souls” (314).

Clearly, the fear of powerful mothers “ extends into Rushdie’s continued horror of grandmothers or matriarchs, always rendered as monstrous or sickening forces of consumption, a threat to masculinity, extending from the register of the sexual into the narrativ and political” (Hai 40).

Rushdie’s focus on the fearsome mother figure is grotesquely epitomized in *Shame* by the Shakil sisters’ large, custom-made dumb-waiter, which provides their only interface with the outside world, and which contains “ secret panels which can shoot out eighteen-inch stiletto blades” (10). At the end of the novel, the stiletto blades dissect the nation’s corrupt former leader Raza Hyder by driving through “ his eyeballs, Adam’s-apple, navel, groin and mouth” and cutting off his tongue (300).

According to Barbara Creed, in her discussion of the monstrous-feminine in horror films, “ recurring images and motifs associated with woman as castrator include knives, axes, ice picks, spiked instruments, teeth, yawning chasms, jagged rocks” and also “ the barred and dangerous entrance” (151, 107). In fact, the horror genre “ abounds with images that play on the fear of castration and dismemberment” (Creed 107). Given the most prominent horror-genre elements and characterizations of *Shame* —a trinity of mothers suggesting a three-headed monster and Sufiya Zinobia, a monstrous female beast—Creed’s analysis of horror films seems especially relevant .

Although Freud, among earlier Western theorists, viewed woman as threatening because she was castrated, contemporary theorists contend that woman is threatening because she is imbued with the power to castrate or

symbolically consume her child of any gender (Creed 87, 109); and this is a Western notion of womanhood/maternity that Rushdie has apparently internalized. Just as “the myth about woman as castrator clearly points to male fears and phantasies about the female genitals as a trap, a black hole which threatens to swallow them up and cut them to pieces” (Creed 106), the Shakil sisters’ dumb-waiter and the light-swallowing quality of the oppressive grandmother Epifania da Gama in *Moor* points to Rushdie’s recurrent theme of compromised male agency threatened if not thwarted by an insatiable female desire.

#### The Inalienable Territory of Pantry and Kitchen

The epithet “Revered Mother” is used by Saleem Sinai to evoke the formidable nature of his Kashmiri grandmother, Naseem Aziz, and to denote her imperious status within the family. She is, to Saleem, a witch-like woman who “lived within an invisible fortress of her own making, an ironclad citadel of traditions and certainties” (40) centered around her home’s pantry and kitchen. When confronted with her husband’s firing of their children’s Muslim tutor who was teaching them to “hate Hindus and Buddhists and Jains and Sikhs and who know what other vegetarians” (42), Naseem retaliates by ruthlessly seizing control of the family’s diet. She attempts to conserve her family’s minority heritage within India by symbolically limiting their consumption of external ideas. In this way, Naseem’s zeal corresponds to the novel’s larger depictions of cultural suppression enacted by political figures attempting to create a cohesive Indian national identity (Bennet 190).

Throughout his fiction, Rushdie relates physical and cultural landscapes to dietary consumption—often associated with female domains—that reveal tensions between essentialist/nativist and hybrid/migrant views of self. The true inheritor of Reverend Mother's prejudices is Saleem's unmarried aunt Alia Aziz, and it is Alia's home in Karachi that Saleem associates with the manufactured purity of Islam in Pakistan, which Saleem sarcastically describes as "the Land of the Pure." He perceives this aunt's highly stylized and affected cooking, her "culinary witchcraft" (380), as infused with negativity.

In Alia's mansion, darkened by the shadow of the nearby mosque, she serves "the birianis of dissension and the nargisi koftas of discord" (378), which break the cohesion of Saleem's family by causing his parents' marriage to fail for the final time and his sister Jamila to seek refuge in a singing career that eventually incites conflict between West and East Pakistan resulting in the independence of Bangladesh. The mosque-darkened kitchen of Alia Aziz provides one of many examples of Rushdie's use of built environments to satirize character and politics.

According to Peter Scriver's analysis of architecture and colonial/postcolonial identity, "Rushdie's buildings . . . are often larger than life . . . It is this grotesqueness, their critical strangeness that makes them speak. Through Rushdie's license to invoke the imaginary, even the absurd, he is enabled to construct architectural metaphors and frame scenarios that can carry multiple registers of meaning" (219). The consequences of Alia's mosque-darkened puritanism, contributing to the fragmentation of her family and the

nation of Pakistan, reinforces Rushdie's view that " attempting to ' purify' anything, countries, religions, languages, peoples, is an act of identity politics which only leads to separatism, and eventually, communal violence" (Hassumani 37-38).

Perhaps it is useful to compare Naseem's and Alia's views of Islamic cuisine to Benedict Anderson's view of print media, such as newspapers, in constructing national consciousness and identity (36). According to Anderson, although " the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (6). It is especially through Naseem's and Alia's preparation of traditional meals that they connect the family to its Kashmiri and Islamic roots and establish—or attempt to establish—the family's participation in the construction of Pakistan as an imagined community just as, perhaps, Americans annually view themselves as American by assembling a Thanksgiving feast. The preparation of Islamic cuisine is, for these characters, a central process of maintaining ethnic and national boundaries and is, arguably, a fundamental expression of these characters' nationalism (Brah 163). At the same time, such quotidian expressions of nationalism call into question more conspicuous, mostly masculine definitions often perceived in terms of public, militaristic values and gestures (Gorra 65).

Breaking Bread and Breaking Taboos



Although Rushdie presents a virtually monolithic view of Karachi, which enables his critiques of Pakistan's religious fundamentalism, he does lure us to one of the city's quiet places, to a kind of nook or cranny inhabited by women, where he is fascinated by the radically different life that goes on. Rushdie speaks of this "hidden" place with its "secret bakery" in the autobiographical essay "On Leavened Bread." This Christian place, known as the Monastery of the Angels, functions as a different kind of female domain than we often see in Rushdie.

It is, above all, certainly less threatening and illustrates a more democratic alternative to the kitchens of Naseem and Alia Aziz. The monastery provides an example of a culture—and specifically the culture of Karachi. Of all places, this religious site became a place of temptation for the young Rushdie, because in the dark hours of the morning it offered the taboo fare of leavened bread. There is an almost guilty, co-conspiratorial quality to his descriptions of wanting the bread—and he was not alone, given the crowds of servants who regularly gathered for the limited amount of loaves.

The nuns' monastery operates as a transgressive site, providing a taste of something "beyond the frontiers of the everyday" and providing "a small revelation" about, we can infer, Rushdie's life in India and Pakistan up to this point of (gastronomic) discovery ("Leavened" 103). Later, we sense that this "small revelation" is about Rushdie's budding sense of life in the West. The "small revelation" incited by the taste of leavened bread signals a cultural coming-of-age.

As a thirteen-year-old in 1961, Rushdie leaves for school in England where he is lured into “ the whorehouses of the bakeries” (“ Leavened” 103). This very phrase is also used to describe Ormus Cama’s insatiable desire for leavened bread in *Ground*: “ The daily purchase and consumption of quantities of bread is, in a way, his first wholeheartedly erotic encounter with London life . . . In the whorehouses of the bakeries Ormus pays without a murmur for his encounters with the amorality of the loaf. It’s anybody’s, but once coin of the realm has been exchanged, these swallowed morsels, these love bites, are his and his alone . . . East is East . . . ah, but yeast is West” (289-290).

The sexual language relating to Rushdie’s actual and fictional consumption of leavened bread clearly denotes a loss of innocence or “ purity” about self that marks the beginning of a heightened cultural promiscuity, and so Rushdie is “ done for” as far as his subcontinental identity is concerned. The taste for leavened bread does its part to destroy his affinities for the dailiness of life in Bombay. In his essay, he recounts how he was “ serially, gluttonously, irredeemably unfaithful to all those chapattis-next-door waiting for me back home. East was East, but yeast was West” (“ Leavened” 103). Clearly, we recognize his “ love affair” with leavened bread as a metaphor for his love affair with places—especially Western places—outside India (“ Leavened” 103). For Ormus in *Ground*, “ There was leavened bread in Bombay, but it was sorry fare: dry, crumbling, tasteless, unleavened bread’s paler, unluckier relation,” and so, in the London bakeries, he “ plunges into

his new world, betraying, without a backward glance, the fabled breads of home” (289).

The sexual and cultural transgression and betrayal that Rushdie couches in terms of consuming forbidden foods becomes an element of what he sees as an individual’s—and especially a writer’s—larger commitment to cultivating a favorable cultural pluralism. “ We are Hindus who have crossed the black water; we are Muslims who eat pork,” he says of subcontinental writers in the West, “ And as a result—as my use of the Christian notion of the Fall indicates—we are now partly of the West. Our identity is at once plural and partial” (“ The Indian Writer” 79). Rushdie sustains his focus on cultural hybridity via the symbolism of food in his last novel *Shalimar the Clown* (2005). Here, he attributes admirable qualities of (pre-1960s) Kashmiris to their permissive dietary practices. It was a place where “ the pandits . . . unlike Brahmins anywhere else in India, happily ate meat,” and, for their part, “ Kashmiri Muslims . . . blurred their faith’s austere monotheism by worshipping at the shrines of the valley’s many local saints” (83).

### The Profanity of Gastronomic Pluralism

Perhaps the most conspicuous effect of a culture’s dietary rules from the perspective of an outsider is its likelihood of otherizing those beyond the culture. “ Most societies . . . have some kind of food taboo, and some have strict dietary laws, one purpose of which is to distinguish members of that society from others and allow them to feel superior (less animal, more spiritual)” (Tuan 36). This effect of deeming oneself spiritually superior

undoubtedly reinforces—to lesser and greater extent—the bonds of the cultural group and equates a rejection of the group and its foundational, spiritual beliefs with blasphemy. This is what we see in *The Satanic Verses* when Gibreel Farishta, famous for his roles in Hindu religious dramas, emerges from his hospital bed (after a near-death experience) angry at the God of Islam and hell-bent on carrying out the most dramatic break with his religion he can imagine. He decides to gorge himself on a variety of pig's meat: “ the pork sausages from Wiltshire and the cured York hams and the rashers of bacon from godknowswhere . . . the gammon steaks of his unbelief and the pig's trotters of secularism” (30).

Through this rabid activity, and “ with pigs falling out of his face,” Gibreel declares “ the non-existence of God” (30-31). This event at the Taj hotel significantly and immediately precedes Gibreel's transgression of another taboo: his romantic and sexual relationship, as a (lapsed) Muslim, with the Jewish Alleluia “ Allie” Cone. Transgressing the dietary prohibition is a sign of Gibreel's refusal to participate in the exclusionary practices of his ethnic group, if we accept that “ ethnicity is primarily a mechanism of boundary maintenance . . . whereby one group constructs its distinctiveness from other” (Brah 163). In this instance, however, the consumption of pig's meat is ironic, because it fosters Gibreel's recognition of the common dietary traditions of Muslims and Jews. Both he and Allie immediately connect on an emotional and intellectual level, given their understanding of the dietary taboo. He says, “ No thunderbolt. That's the point.” She says, “ You got your life back. *That's* the point” (31). Both “ points” fundamentally affirm a

defiance of mutually held religious constraints, and this “commensality” of ideas prefaces their sexual relationship, which is not unexpected from the standpoint that the sharing of food, or “commensality,” provides metaphors of sexual exchange in virtually all cultures (Mohanty 118).

### The Islamic Chadar and the Refuge of the Christian Bakery

Saleem Sinai's sister Jamila takes on different monikers and personas in *Midnight's Children*: the Brass Monkey, Jamila Singer, the Voice of the Nation, Pakistan's Angel, the Bulbul-of-the-Faith. She is known for her vociferousness as a child and is prized for her singing voice as a young adult. Although the energetic and independent Jamila takes a brief early interest in Christianity in Bombay, once the family moves to Karachi we witness Jamila's progressive loss of independence: through her surrender to the female domesticity of a conservative society, through her disappearance behind the brocaded silk chadar (which she must wear in order to sing in public), and through the loss of her voice in opposition to the powerful men who transform her into a national icon singing the praises of Pakistan. Jamila's chadar holds her “within the prescribed limits of female space as defined by Muslim patriarchy,” which allows men to “make of her what they will: superimposing their own desires onto the *tabula rasa*” (Grace 190). For Saleem, Jamila's tragedy resides in the loss of her youthful identity: “Her character began to owe more to the most strident aspects of the national persona than to the child-world of her Monkey years” (*Midnight's* 359).

Through all of his sister's transformations, it is as though Saleem patiently waits to witness the reemergence of his favorite version: the obstreperous Brass Monkey. And what the young "Monkey" shares in common with the adult "Singer" is a love of bread. "Chapatis, parathas, tandoori nans? Yes, but. Well then: was yeast preferred? It was; my sister—despite patriotism—hankered constantly after leavened bread" (361). In his quest to break Jamila out of her mold as Bulbul-of-the-Faith, Saleem takes it upon himself to supply her with the subversive bread of Karachi's Christian nuns of the order of Santa Ignacia. "Criticism was entirely absent from my heart," he says rather disingenuously, "never once did I ask my sister whether this last relic of her old flirtation with Christianity might not look rather bad in her new role of Bulbul of the Faith" (361).

What we see in Jamila, and what Saleem also recognizes, is her simultaneous contribution and threat to nationalist causes. Through her character, we see how women are crucial to the construction and reproduction of nationalist ideologies. When represented as guardians of the 'race' and nation, women not only signify and demarcate juridical, political, cultural and psychic boundaries of a national collectivity, they inscribe these boundaries in and through a myriad of cultural practices that construct and reproduce particular notions of tradition (Brah 164-165).

Eventually, when Jamila does speak out against Pakistan's rulers during the civil war between its East and West wings, Saleem hears as rumor or as fact that she has been silenced forever through a political killing (452). Refusing to believe in her death, Saleem imagines and dreams she is safe: "nuns are

opening doors as she cries sanctuary, yes, there she is, safely inside, doors being bolted behind her, exchanging one kind of invisibility for another, there is another Reverend Mother now, as Jamila Singer who once, as the Brass Monkey, flirted with Christianity, finds safety shelter peace in the midst of the hidden order of Santa Ignacia . . . yes, she is there, safe, . . . baking bread, singing sweetly to the secret nuns” (453).

Later, in *Moor*, we see another sister entering a Christian convent. But for Minnie Zogoiby, a. k. a. Sister Floreas, the convent is not a safe place and becomes, in fact, the location of her death when explosions tear apart the city of Bombay and also kill her father Abraham. Significantly, these female sanctuaries suggest Rushdie’s inability to invest in these most hopeful of places. Rushdie appears incapable of envisioning a functional female (and Christian) domain persevering in India and Pakistan. In his fiction, such places can only exist in mystery and imagination.

### Sites of Mothering

It is not surprising that *Shame* ends with the protagonist’s life being threatened on two fronts: from the world *outside* Nishapur, where Omar Khayyam imagines his “ wife” Sufiya Zinobia, transformed into a man-hunting beast, is tracking him like the most delicious of prey; and from the world *within* Nishapur, where he imagines his three mothers are not about to save him from a probable death due to malaria or their own poisoning. And the Shakil sisters are not the only mothers accused of poisoning their offspring. In *Ground*, Antoinette Corinth, an Englishwoman who owns a

clothing boutique in London named “ The Witch Flies High,” is suspected of “ infantilizing” her two teen-aged sons by giving them drugs so they will remain “ babyish, helpless, dependent . . . hers” (286). Like the wicked grandmother Epifania da Gama in *Moor* , Corinth fashions a dark and self-serving black hole of a domain: “ She pulls the city into her gravitational field, shapes the moment to her will. Within its event horizon, the laws of the universe cease to apply. Darkness reigns. Antoinette Corinth is the only law” (282). After her sons die in a car accident, Corinth is accused by her ex-husband of murdering her sons out of spite for him by dosing the boys’ thermos of tea with high levels of hallucinogenic acid (311).

Also in *Ground* is Vina Apsara, an iconic pop star, whose mother murdered all but one of her children and second husband before hanging herself. In depicting fearsome, murderous, man-killing women, Rushdie’s “ narratives undermine their own (proto)feminist strains by regressing (perhaps because of a concurrent anxiety about effeminization/emasculatation) into reifications of stereotypes of gender and sexuality, or odd ways of asserting a beleaguered masculinity, and into replaying surprisingly parochial and patriarchal discourses of gender and sexuality” (Hai 18).

Rushdie, however, seems to anticipate the psychological hypotheses of his critics and tries to preempt their commentary by planting savvy remarks of a metafictional nature within the fiction. “ It would be easy to argue that Omar Khayyam developed pronounced misogynist tendencies at an early age,” says the narrator of *Shame* , as if to chastise and shame the reader-critic, “ that all his subsequent dealings with women were acts of revenge against



the memory of his mothers” (35). This shaming quality is also evident in *Ground*, where the narrator mockingly evaluates his subconscious motivations: “ Did I quit Bombay . . . because the whole damn city felt like my mother’s womb and I had to go abroad to get myself born? Such are the psychological explanations on offer, readily available from stock” (76).

Despite Rushdie’s preemptive rhetorical strategies, it is arguable—especially because the dynamic is recognizable in different novels—that his apparent anxiety is perhaps attributable to infantile, pre-verbal male fears of female power. In concern with this view, Chilla Bulbeck in her commentary about female monsters, states: “ rather than fear or envy of women’s power to give life, men’s hatred of women derives from their subconsciously stored fear of their own all-powerful mothers” (135). Once again: Despite Rushdie’s attempts in *Shame* to silence critics, they nevertheless equate the Shakil matriarchs with “ the cause of Omar Khayyam’s adult hatred and repression of women” (Grewal 142). The womb-like claustrophobia of Nishapur represents the clearest example of Rushdie’s “ fear of engulfment—both literal and metaphorical—by what is seen as female power/sexuality threatening to malehood” (Hai 40).

The problematic “ hero” of *Shame* is not the only male protagonist who flees a matriarchal domain and transforms his feelings of powerlessness into actualized violence. For Moraes Zogoiby in *Moor*, the anger simmers for years while witnessing his father appearing to be endlessly debased by his much younger, artistically accomplished and popular wife Aurora. As a mother, she is described as especially neglectful of her three daughters and

emotionally devastating to her son. “ Ask me how it felt!” says Moraes. “ I was her only son. The closer to the bull you work, the likelier you are to be gored” (171). Although it is true that he eventually gains sympathy for his late mother, much of the narrative concerns the repercussions of Moraes’s “ mother-murdered” existence characterized by a “ lifetime of fury that had begun to explode from his fist” (306).

### Displaced Patriarchs and their Displaced Sons

The fear of engulfment, of an existence being obliterated from the physical, social and psychic landscape, is paradoxically subtle yet conspicuous in *Midnight’s Children* . Although the novel’s protagonist Saleem Sinai is described as symbolically breaking up into fragments, which represents his perceived disintegration of postcolonial India stemming from cultural, political, and class factions, the country is alternatively perceived and portrayed—whether historically accurate or not—as coalescing and modernizing as a result of its ambitious women who are (quietly) rising up in the ranks and displacing the men in India’s urban centers. Rushdie recalls such competent and intimidating women within his own family in India and Pakistan.

“ While I was growing up,” he states, “ the family’s houses . . . were full of the instructions, quarrels, laughter, and ambitions of . . . women . . . opinionated, voluble, smart, funny, arm-waving persons—lawyers, educators, radicals, movers, shakers, matriarchs—and to be heard in their company you needed to raise your voice and have something interesting to say” (“

Abortion” 324) Foremost among the men displaced by ambitious and upwardly mobile women in *Midnight's Children* is Dr. Narlikar, an obstetrician-gynecologist who has delivered enough babies to be disillusioned and disgusted by the reproductive powers of female bodies and by the cultural and especially religious valorizations of fertility contributing to the overpopulation of the subcontinent.

As a result, Narlikar invests his energies not in human worth but in the worth of Bombay real estate. Specifically, he enlists Saleem's father, Ahmed Sinai, in a business plan to create a sea wall of cement tetrapods allowing land to be reclaimed upon which they would build lucrative shoreline properties. The project is described as means for Saleem's financially compromised and sexually impotent father to expend his sexual energies. However, early on, Narlikar becomes outraged by the sight of Hindu women transforming his monumental tetrapod into a Shiva-lingam, and the doctor ends up crushed to death by the fertility symbol.

After Narlikar's death, his estate is taken over by indistinguishable female relatives who, like the Shakil sisters, operate as a collective body. “ Doctor Narlikar suddenly acquired an enormous family of female relations,” Saleem recounts. “ Having been a bachelor and misogynist all his life, he was engulfed, in death, by a sea of giant, noisy, omnicompetent women, who came crawling out from strange corners of the city” (203). These women oust Saleem's father from Dr. Narlikar's land-reclamation project and, depriving him of substantial revenue, eventually persuade—if not force—him to sell his home, Buckingham Villa, one of the European-style mansions—and

symbol of eminent social status in post-colonial Bombay—previously owned by the English colonial Sir William Methwold.

In place of the Methwold mansions, the Narlikar women made plans to erect their own “ mansion which would soar thirty stories into the skies, a triumphant pink obelisk, a signpost of their future” (304-305). These women are, in Saleem’s estimation, the true “ heirs of William Methwold” (204). Their rise to power is contrasted with Ahmed Sinai’s decline and eventual relocation to the relative margins of Karachi, Pakistan. Following the appearance of the enterprising women, Saleem avows that his father steadily began “ to fade” (204).

When Saleem returns to Bombay as an adult, the Narlikar women’s “ great pink monster” stands where his childhood home once stood, and along the shoreline of Bombay their “ vast monsters soared upwards to the sky” (521). The changed skyline of the city disorients and makes Saleem feel like a displaced person. “ It was my Bombay,” he states wistfully, “ but also not mine” (521). In the familiar landscape where he once grew up among the privileged children of the city, Saleem is now relegated—although he does not necessarily view or phrase it this way—to the margins. He spends his days working as a manager for his former ayah, Mary Pereira, whose successful pickle business is financially backed by the Narlikars.

Given Mary’s “ ancient hatred of ‘ the mens,’” Saleem and his young son Adam are the only males allowed into the pickle factory where “ the formidable competence of the Narlikar females is reflected . . . in the strong-

armed dedication of the vatstirrers” (529-530). Indicating a reversal of fortunes and the radical shifting of (gender) roles, the former ayah-turned-entrepreneur lives in the pink obelisk, where her bedroom “ occupies more or less the same cube of air” where she once “ slept on a servant’s mat” on Saleem’s bedroom floor (527).

### The Emasculating Domain of Mother India

The novel *Fury* operates somewhat like a mystery. Its main character Malik Solanka is a former Bombayite and former Cambridge professor whose BBC program *The Adventures of Little Brain* , and especially its spin-off doll “ Little Brain,” has turned into a runaway commercial success. Unhappy with his unforeseen fortune, and unable to comprehend why he almost murdered his sleeping English wife and their son one night, Solanka abruptly escapes to New York City where he begins to examine his capacity for murder. In New York, there have been slayings of young society women, and Solanka wonders—as readers do—whether he should be considered the prime suspect in the serial killings. But, all the while, readers are also left to ask a more fundamental question having to do with the core mystery of the novel: What is Solanka running from that fills him with fury?

One oddity we discover about Malik Solanka is that he forbids himself to think about Bombay, and as readers we realize this is a major clue. The Indian city, however, intrudes on Solanka’s memory and trails him as he walks the streets of New York where he wishes to forget his different pasts. In Bombay, Malik and his young mother Mallika had been abandoned by his

father before his first birthday, and Malik's attractive mother remarried quickly. In addition to the male version of his mother's name, Malik was given the name of his physician stepfather, Dr. Solanka, which "cheated Malik of history as well as feeling" (221).

At six years old, this stepfather began to sexually abuse Malik while he was dressed in girl's clothing. But, interestingly, it is the culpability of Malik's mother that infuriates him just as much as the abuse: perhaps even more. "Oh, my weak mother," he says to himself, "you brought me ribbons and frocks. And when the bastard told you that your frail constitution . . . would benefit from daily exercise, when he sent you away for long walks at the Hanging Gardens or Mahalaxmi Racecourse, did you not think to ask why he did not walk by your side; why, dismissing the ayah, he insisted on caring for his little 'girl' alone?" (222).

Although he does not dwell on it, the adult Malik certainly accuses his mother of having sacrificed him to a sexual predator—of dismissing the evidence—for the sake of the financial security provided by her second husband. Instead of this "weak" female, it took a powerful male, the banker neighbor Mr. Venkat, to put an end to the sexual abuse by threatening to expose the abuser. Years later at the age of sixty, Mr. Venkat becomes a *sanyasi*, a mendicant, and Malik's remembrance of this spiritually powerful male is predictably pitted against the memory of his spiritually impoverished mother. After Mr. Venkat's intervention, Malik's mother grew apologetic and was filled with "guilty grief" (223). But it is perhaps this grief that convicts her as an accessory to her husband's crime. It is the memory of this grief,

above all, that still infuriates Malik: “ He needed a mother, not a waterworks utility like the one on the Monopoly board” (223).

The adult Solanka remains unforgiving of his mother, and memories of the home life following Mr. Venkat’s intervention are also at the heart of Solanka’s “ long-sealed-away fury,” which “ had not lost any of its power over him” (146). Malik’s significant adult response is to reassure himself of his masculine, sexual potency by wooing beautiful women, and the one most satisfying this need is a young (Indo-Fijian) woman named Neela Mahendra. In her presence, “ Solanka felt himself begin to change, felt the inner demons he feared so much growing weaker by the day, felt unpredictable rage give way . . . If he was right, and the origin of fury lay in life’s accumulating disappointments, then he had found the antidote that transformed the poison into its opposite” (205-206). Thus, Solanka makes peace with his impotent past as a “ girl” by replacing the weak, disempowering mother with the belief in his own sexual empowerment.

#### Rushdie’s Fears of Emasculation

It is arguable that Rushdie, via the character of Solanka, is alluding to his own anger—his own fury—at his runaway critical and commercial success. What did writing the “ Booker of Bookers” and the internationally notorious *Satanic Verses* bring him? Wealth and celebrity, it’s true, but also Khomeini’s infamous fatwa and years of living in forced seclusion. And if that were not enough—more than one author could bargain for—there has also been the downside to critical acclaim, perhaps even worse than receiving negative

reviews, as implied by the narrative of *Fury*: the possibility of one's thought, one's "Little Brain (child)," taking on a life of its own—to the point of eclipsing and silencing its author. For Malik Solanka, the "creature of his own imagining Little Brain, born of his best self and purest endeavor, was turning before his eyes into the kind of monster of tawdry celebrity he most profoundly abhorred" (*Fury* 98). The multi-marketed Little Brain clearly infuriated him: "Fury stood above him like a cresting Hokusai wave. Little Brain was his delinquent child grown into a rampaging giantess, who now stood for everything he despised and trampled beneath her giant feet all the high principles he had brought her into being to extol; including, evidently, his own principles" (*Fury* 100).

Ironically, the initial reception of *Fury* was skewed by the common view of critics that it was a thinly disguised autobiography. The novel's Malik Solanka was widely held to be a mere surrogate for Rushdie. As a result, "Rushdie himself was subject to critique, as he had recently invited public censure by leaving his third wife and their son to move to New York and start a relationship with Padma Lakshmi, a Miss Universe contestant and model half his age" (Brouillette 139). The focus on Rushdie's personal life, on his celebrity, sidelined more illuminating inquiries into the suggestive meta-text of *Fury*, which fundamentally concerns "Rushdie" as "brand name, as paratext, and as icon" (Brouillette 151). In his essay, "A Dream of Glorious Return," which describes Rushdie's first visit to India a decade after the fatwa, Rushdie reveals an acute awareness of his status as "Rushdie" the



famous and infamous author he “ often barely recognizes” *compared with* the “ Salman” he “ knows” (204).

If we are at all to equate Rushdie with his protagonist Solanka, then it is perhaps most illuminating to pursue the issue of the main character no longer having sole, creative control over Little Brain, his intellectual property. The doll’s franchising is in the hands of numerous and anonymous others—and Solanka feels morally frustrated and marginalized by this facet of his success: “ He was compromised by greed, and the compromise sealed his lips. Contractually bound not to attack the goose that laid the golden eggs, he had to bottle up his thoughts and, in keeping his own counsel, filled up with the bitter bile of his many discontents. With every new media initiative spearheaded by the character he had once delineated with such sprightliness and care, his impotent fury grew” (100). Perhaps the imposed and self-imposed silence of Solanka, leading to feelings of discontent and impotence, reveal something of Rushdie’s experience of literary success in which the commodification of his writing and persona represent a kind of silencing or death.

#### Emasculation as Justification for Breaking the Motherland’s Embrace

It is the sexual molestation of Saladin Chamcha in *The Satanic Verses* that provides him, as a young man, his greatest (though secret) motivation or justification to leave India. When he is thirteen, he leaves the protective enclosure of his father’s estate in Bombay to stroll down to the seashore, where, “ in a hollow of black stone Salahuddin saw a man in a dhoti . . . and

the man beckoned him with a single finger which he then laid across his lips. *Shh . . .* finger curling, curling like a baited hook, come. When Salahuddin came down the other grasped him, put a hand around his mouth and forced his young hand . . . to feel the fleshbone there” (38).

This traumatic experience transforms the entire landscape of Bombay—if not the whole of India—into an unsafe world for Saladin. He does not speak to anyone about the incident, and the narrative overall appears to refract this silence by downplaying the incident and placing the novel’s thematic emphases elsewhere: on migrancy, religious historiography, the racial politics of London during the Thatcher years. Yet it is arguable that Saladin’s molestation by a stranger more than anything—more than his rivalry with his father, more than his ingrained Anglophilia—sets the course for much of his adult life.

One of the fundamental insights we are given into Chamcha’s perspective is that “ everything loathsome, everything he had come to revile about his home town, had come together in the stranger’s bony embrace, and now that he had escaped that evil skeleton he must also escape Bombay, or die. He began to concentrate fiercely upon this idea, to fix his will upon it at all times . . . zeroing in on London like a bomb” (39). Similar to Malik Solanka, Saladin compensates his resulting anxieties about powerlessness and emasculation and homosexuality by attempting to find “ someone to believe in him, to prove he’s managed it” (49), which climaxes during his early adult life in his first marriage to Pamela Lovelace, an Englishwoman. This sequence of events—the feeling of emasculation followed by the plunge into

a conventional, heteronormative relationship—is also recognizable in *Shame*, where it is the faulty love-at-first-sight of Farah Zoroaster that leads the adolescent Omar Khayyam Shakil to believe he has “the strength to break his mothers’ power” (23).

The most graphic depiction of emasculation in Rushdie’s work is that of Saleem Sinai in *Midnight’s Children*, because Saleem is literally castrated (as was historically the case) by the “Widow,” Indira Gandhi. “Test- and hysterectomized,” he says, “the children of midnight were denied the possibility of reproducing themselves . . . but that was only a side-effect, because they . . . drained us of more than that: hope, too, was excised” (505). This forced removal of hope, this “sperectomy,” is not simply disabling, however, because it appears to enable Saleem’s (and Rushdie’s) feelings of hopelessness if not disgust with India and allows the author in particular a measure of distance from the motherland. “Saleem’s impotence acts as an immunizing agent against India itself, registering not only Rushdie’s sense of political inefficacy but also his need for distance from intimate embrace of the incorporative nation” (Kane 114).

Similarly, for Rushdie’s *adult* characters who were once lured by a “dream” life in England, it is the experience of sexual threat or violation—and particularly homosexual threat or violation—that transforms their lingering anglophilia into anglophobia. Leela Gandhi, in her essay about Saladin’s dream England asks: “What really happens to Saladin Chamcha in ‘the windowless police van’ that takes him to the detention centre? . . . Rushdie refuses the inducements of an explicit rape narrative. And yet . . . he

supplies his readers with a densely implicative catalogue of (homo)sexual abuse” (165). It is this implicit homosexual violation that precipitates Saladin’s eventual rejection of England, and Gandhi notes a similar dynamic with the character of Ormus Cama in *Ground* whose “ convalescence from the sickness of England-love is also intimately bound up with the strength of his emerging homophobia” (166).

Each instance of Saladin’s homosexual violation in *The Satanic Verses* constitutes only “ a small scene in a massive book. Nevertheless, Rushdie’s dramatization of homosexual panic at the origins of Chamcha’s political education must give pause. Why does Chamcha have to undergo a specifically homosexual humiliation in order to achieve a distance from England? How can we explain the performative homophobia of the text, its postulation of homosexual activity only as violation or racism or *threat*?” (Gandhi 166). Gandhi concludes that such “ homosexual panic represents an updated or residual version of older fears about colonial emasculation” (166). Significantly, it is this common-ground fear of vestigial colonial emasculation driving Rushdie’s characters from location to location, and it becomes clear that location matters less than the ability to maintain the integrity of one’s masculine identity.

#### Rushdie’s View of “ Third-World” Female Domains

“ Women have made me; and also unmade,” says Saleem Sinai. “ From Reverend Mother to the Widow, and even beyond, I have been at the mercy of the so-called (erroneously, in my opinion!) gentler sex. It is, perhaps, a

matter of connection: is not Mother India, Bharat-Mata, commonly thought of as female? And, as you know, there's no escape from her" (465). This reinforced stereotype of the threatening mother is what rankles critics outside the West who perceive Rushdie as contributing misperceptions and attitudes underlying Western neocolonialism in Asia and other areas of the so-called "Third World" (Gorra 130).

Clearly, the novel *Shame* is especially fearful of female domains depicted in the microcosm of Nishapur and the macrocosm of quasi-Pakistan whose violent political patriarchs are nevertheless controlled by the (petty) demands of their mothers: "at the time of the Pan-Islamic conference . . . Heads of State . . . all brought their mothers along, so that all hell broke loose, because the mothers in the zenana wing . . . kept sending urgent messages to their sons, interrupting the conference's plenipotentiary sessions to complain about mortal insults received and honour besmirched, which brought the world leaders close to starting fist-fights or even wars" (260). According to Aijaz Ahmad, the "sense of being trapped permeates the book, right up to the final dénouement where we find that even dictators cannot cross the 'frontier' and escape their cage" (139).

Central to feelings of a threatened manhood in *Shame* is the character of Sufiya Zinobia Hyder, the beast within the beautiful female who rips the heads off physically fit men and who threatens to consume her much-older husband, the improbable hero of the novel, Omar Khayyam Shakil. Sufiya's presence in the narrative as a stalking feline predator emphasizes her sexual threat. Her sharp teeth and powerful jaw are reminiscent of historical

paintings depicting a beautiful woman “ accompanied by an animal companion with open jaws and snapping teeth . . . representing her deadly genital trap and evil intent” (Creed 108). Sufiya’s character is “‘ sleeping-beauty,’ ‘ beast,’ the seducer, the emasculating, insane woman fatal to men. Such representations indicate Rushdie’s inability to resolve the tension between the desire to help women and fear of them” (Grewal 141).

As much as the three-headed mother composed of the Shakil sisters, Sufiya threatens the existence of the novel’s faulty protagonist and encourages the narrative’s otherizing of women (Grewal 125). By virtue of her family, Sufiya is “ monstrously installed at the very centre, the very heart, of her society. She is the fruit of a legacy of that ‘ mimicry’ which should really be described as repetition, such that the behavior of Pakistan’s rulers cannot be easily differentiated from the behaviour of their imperial predecessors” (Punter 114).

The grossly exaggerated character of Sufiya—especially as rapist—is entirely problematic to Ahmad, who views this character as a testament to Rushdie’s inability to imagine the possibility of postcolonial Pakistan allowing its female (and male) citizens an effective, non-violent means of political protest and resistance (149-150). What Rushdie flagrantly ignores, states Ahmad, “ is the dailiness of lives lived under oppression, and the human bonding—of resistance, of decency, of innumerable heroisms of both ordinary and extraordinary kinds—which makes it possible for large numbers of people to look each other in the eye, without guilt, with affection and solidarity and

humour, and makes life, even under oppression, endurable and frequently joyous" (139).

We can speculate that Omar Khayyam's, and perhaps Rushdie's, dismissals of Pakistan (and India) have to do with his prevalent, persistent, and Western conceptual relegation of "Third World" societies as incapable of nurturing—if not essentially hindering—what he tacitly views as his empowered masculine destiny. Omar Khayyam first leaves Nishapur to begin his formal education by men, and what he claims to learn, early on, is that "his mothers' point of view was holding him back" (31).

This claim, incidentally, seems disingenuous, because almost never has Omar Khayyam Shakil not held such a perspective. His education outside Nishapur continuously reinforces this early perspective, solidifying his view that to earn the status of a respected adult male requires a dissociation from his *shame* fully "weak" and socially emasculating maternal homeland(s). The various settings in *Shame* emphasize how "women are situated within the female domestic space of the home and men in the dynamic public space of politics" (Grace 196). Omar Khhayyam, who later joins the political scene of quasi-Pakistan, therefore sets his youthful will to escape the symbolic "third world that was neither material nor spiritual" (23) where he is "fed at too-many ineffectual mammary glands" (24).

In the end, the "hero" of *Shame* cannot elude his predatory wife Sufiya who finally rips off his head: But neither can Omar Khayyam Shakil escape his three "formidable" mothers who mysteriously vanish from sight but survive

their apparently planned destruction of Nishapur which almost simultaneously kills him. The final line of the novel leaves readers with the looming image of a “grey and headless man, a figure of dreams, a phantom with one arm lifted in a gesture of farewell” (305). This final image, according to Sara Suleri, “is completely handed over to the male, so that the reader too is forced to read the text’s vision of apocalypse from the point of view of a male terror as it watches the bestiality of the approaching female” (187). In Freudian terms, decapitation equals castration (Creed 110), suggesting that Rushdie leaves us with the haunting instance of a once-empowered male who has been castrated by his wife and mother(s)—virtually at the same time— and whose identity, therefore, has been consumed by them.

### Escaping the Motherland

That the motherland of Nishpur represents not only the larger nation of Pakistan but of India—and especially Rushdie’s birthplace of tropical Bombay—is perhaps suggested by his descriptions of the Shakil mansion as a “thing-infested jungle” and “a sweltering, entropical zone in which, despite all the rotting-down of the past, nothing new seemed capable of growth, and from which it became Omar Khayyam’s most cherished youthful ambition quickly to escape” (24). Rushdie’s linkage of the treacherous female/matriarchal landscape and the tropics is notably in keeping with historical, Western colonial views of the tropics as “unquestionably feminine” and dangerous (Sawyer and Agrawal 75). Rushdie’s play on the word “entropy,” suggests an ambivalent, self-conscious—and therefore



vexed—internalization of colonialist views of the tropics as “*en tropical*” locations: despite the fact that elsewhere in his works Rushdie attempts to counter such conflation of the tropics with marginal identities Kane (Sawyer and Agrawal).

Beyond Pakistan, as depicted in *Shame*, Rushdie’s fiction implies that (Westernized) males from the “Third World” need to part with the influences—cultural and otherwise—of their motherlands. Fatherlands, as becomes obvious, only exist in the “First World.” The “entropical” zone of Nishapur not only endangers Omar Khayyam’s psychic survival by embodying a monstrously feminine and predatory space but, given its “tropical” qualities, by being a non-Western space as well. “While the tropics are gendered female, they are also raced nonwhite” (Sawyer and Agrawal 76).

Just as Rushdie tries to preempt psychological analyses of his characters, he also seems to preempt feminist critiques of his works, and here especially of *Shame*, by having his narrator(s) anticipate such criticism: “I hope that it goes without saying,” his narrator says, “that not all women are crushed by any system, no matter how oppressive. It is commonly and, I believe, accurately said of Pakistan that her women are much more impressive than her men . . . their chains, nevertheless, are no fictions. They exist. And they are getting heavier” (181).

Despite such apparently sympathetic narrative asides, Rushdie’s women in this novel—and elsewhere—are depicted as not only oppressed but oppressive. Some critics claim, however, that we can or should counter the

patriarchal views leveled against Rushdie. “ I would argue that the faults his critics find with the novel ( *Shame* ) do not preclude the possibility of calling him a feminist writer,” says Justyna Deszcz, who suggests that “ Sufiya’s lethal aggressiveness . . . be interpreted not as destructive violence, but as resistance to the oppressive conventions imposed on her by society and especially by male authority” (37).

Deszcz views Sufiya as empowered by her subversion and transgression of patriarchal definitions of women and femininity (37). This minority view is not without its merits. Chandra Talpade Mohanty in her questioning of Western views of Third-World women, for example, cautions against common, binaristic assumptions about gender such as “ Men exploit, women are exploited” (31) or perhaps the related assumption that men are aggressive and women passive. Along these lines, discussions of the monstrous feminine counter “ the view that femininity, by definition, constitutes passivity” (Creed 151).

It is not merely the man/father but the woman/mother who can be a terrifying “ agent of castration” (Creed 151). Nevertheless, it still remains difficult to ignore that “ Rushdie’s unmistakable relish in and replay of very recognizably deleterious stereotypes, his returns to a discourse of ribaldry and gendered sexual rhetoric, his suspicion of feminism and matriarchy even as he seeks to promote them (all of which) suggests perhaps another form of belonging . . . to another patriarchal code to which he cannot bid farewell” (Hai 45-46).

Countering the view which values migrant identity, Leela Gandhi cautions readers to be wary of Rushdie's novels of exile in which his "censure of the post *colonized* nation can be read as an apology for the emigration of his heroes." She goes on to add: "Seeking fictional exoneration for these émigré-heroes, he insists upon the uninhabitability of the subcontinent either by inventing a threat to their lives, or through the device of family quarrels and deaths which conclusively sever ties with 'home'" (Gandhi 158). Extrapolating from this view, we recognize Rushdie's commitment to patriarchy—and Western/metropolitan identity—more than we do to rootedness in the otherized, postcolonial motherlands of Pakistan and especially India (at least temporarily).

The dynamic constitutes a rather familiar trope, because "it is only insofar as 'woman/women' and 'the East' are defined as others, or as peripheral, that (Western) man/humanism can represent him/itself as the center" (Mohanty 41-42). It is easier for Rushdie to reject non-Western female-associated domains in order to manifest a respected masculine identity in East and West, north and south (and it is presumably easier for an upper-class male of any ethnicity); therefore, Rushdie ultimately appears to avail himself of this transnational male privilege that partially maintains itself through shared anxieties of female power ringing through loudly in his frustration with inadequate female domains that are nevertheless perceived as threatening to (Western) masculinity.

## Conclusion

Addressing the reader from a metafictional standpoint, Rushdie states that the quasi-Pakistani and Indian women of *Shame* and *The Moor's Last Sigh* are demanding control of his narratives by, respectively, “ marching in from the peripheries” and “ moving to the centre of his little stage.” Although we might view these female characters as progressively shifting the conventional masculine concerns of each novel to the margins—and although the narrators and author imply a feminist perspective—the male protagonists display a pronounced anxiety about women as a result of feeling marginalized and especially emasculated in the fictionalized landscapes of Pakistan and India; and we can speculate that this results partially from the author’s internalization of a Western masculine identity and geopolitical worldview. This self-perception of deficiency is revealed to have unmitigated, lifelong effects such that the flawed and rather unsympathetic protagonist of *Shame* , Omar Khayyam Shakil, still feels like “ a peripheral man” during his “ days of greatest distinction” (17) and often precipitates, from the sidelines, political violence and violence specifically against women.

For some critics, this recognizable response of Rushdie’s male protagonists, in concert with the nature of his narrators, undercuts the feminist claims of the novels and the author. Commenting upon his fiction, Rushdie has stated that he “ repeatedly seeks to create female characters as rich and powerful as those he has known” and that “ the men in his books are rarely as flamboyant as the women” (“ Abortion” 324). Nevertheless, critics describe the voice of Rushdie’s narrator(s) as too domineering to enable the concerns

and achievements of Pakistani and Indian women to be significantly registered by readers (Grewal 125). Others have plainly stated that Rushdie's troubling depictions of women constitute the "biggest ideological calamity in nearly all of his novels" (Rajamani 165). In works such as *Midnight's Children*, *Shame*, *The Satanic Verses*, *The Moor's Last Sigh* and *Fury*, the anxieties exhibited by Rushdie's Western/metropolitan male characters and narrators regarding female-associated domains become manifest, at the extreme, in their temporary or indefinite rejections of Pakistan and India as deficient yet ultimately castrating motherlands.

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