Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* and *Shame*: From Androgyny to the Cyborg

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Introduction

Reaching a firm decision on the most adequate theoretical prism to address Salman Rushdie's fiction will always remain a challenging task, for the critic is confronted with a writer who bears postcolonial, postmodern, and feminist credentials. And yet, magic realism as an esthetic of catachresis and the thread that interweaves the previous disparate strands offers a possible entryway to Rushdie's gender politics. Catachresis, as it is defined by Paul de Man, is a rhetorical device that "can dismember the texture of reality and reassemble it in the most capricious of ways, pairing man with woman or human being with beast in the most unnatural shapes. Something monstrous lurks in the most innocent of catachreses" (21). Monsters, in this sense, are scandalous as they throw into disarray a system of binary opposition that perpetuates itself through all sorts of divisions between culture/nature, man/woman, passive/active, private/public, mind/body, human/animal, etc. Their function is to undermine exclusionary perceptions of reality that inform hierarchy and domination, which makes them convenient for Rushdie's endeavor to tap the full potential of magic realism, that hybrid "mingling of fantasy and naturalism" (*Imaginary* 19), for his feminist critique of patriarchal societies in the Indian Subcontinent. In keeping with this poststructuralist spirit that does not tolerate the confinement of individuals into categorical identity-slots, the present paper shall turn to the monstrous figures of androgyny and the cyborg as they are deployed in Rushdie's novels *Midnight's Children* (1981) and *Shame* (1983) so as to listen to what they have to tell us about our own embodied gender subjectivities.

Salman Rushdie constructs his novel *Midnight's Children* around protagonist Saleem Sinai, the allegorical embodiment of newly independent India, who through the gift of telepathy is capable of convening in his own head the magical Midnight's Children Conference, nurturing thus an extravagant hope for a secular, democratic nation. A nation where exclusion is banished, and a third principle beyond rigid dichotomies reigns supreme, where all sorts of individuals are welcomed, including children who can step across mirrors, change sex by jumping into a river, or undertake time-travel. Keeping to the same egalitarian principles, if only by way of a more acerbic satire toward patriarchal Pakistan, Rushdie denounces in *Shame* the tragic hi/story of Sufiya Zinobia, who is made to stand allegorically for all the sordid corruption rampant in the country.

Setting out as an innocent idiot, Sufiya is weirdly transformed, through an infernal cycle of persecution, into a woman-panther, burning with a fiery violence that threatens to wreak havoc in the world around her. Stated otherwise, she becomes the beast inside the beauty, or else a sleeping beauty that shakes off the narcotic drugs of patriarchal subjugation without the help of "the blue-blooded kiss of a prince" (*Shame* 242). Such creative revisiting of the fairytale genre, Jusyna Deszcz argues, reveals Rushdie's "artistic and political stance" which is overall congenial to women's emancipation (27).

Indeed, several critics have engaged with Rushdie's gender politics in the two novels under consideration without reaching a consensus over his postcolonial feminist agenda. Teresa Heffernan, for instance, is aligned with Rushdie's perspective, laying the blame of misogyny at the feet of postcolonial societies and their political regimes. Heffernan considers that in the Indian subcontinent after Independence both the secular and religious models of the nation appropriate the feminine body, at the same time as they exclude women from the public sphere. In *Midnight's Children*, she argues, the patriarchal grandfather Aadam Aziz forcibly unveils his wife Naseem in a gesture that violates her freedom, but does not turn her into a modern Indian woman. At the other extreme, Saleem Sinai's sister, the Brass Monkey, is converted into Jamila Singer, the veiled disembodied voice of Pakistan and the sword that would cleanse the country from all sorts of impurities. As such, the nation in post-independence India is problematically "secured by the figure of the (un)veiled woman" (Heffernan 482). For Heffernan, Rushdie unmasks patriarchal ideology by revealing that women under the aegis of the social/sexual contract (Pateman 1988) are relegated to the periphery of the civil state at the same time as their procreative powers are sublimated so that men, the legislators of the city, give birth to a homogeneous body politic. However, Aijaz Ahmad maintains that even if women are propelled to the forefront of the public scene in Rushdie's *Shame*, where they have presumably "marched in from the peripheries of the story to demand the inclusion of their own tragedies, histories and comedies" (*Shame* 173), they are still depicted through "a system of imageries which is sexually overdetermined; the frustration of erotic need, which drives some to nullity and others to frenzy, appears in every case to be the central fact of a woman's experience" (144). Beyond the charge of misogyny, Ahmad admonishes Rushdie for precluding women from any dignified, regenerative project of social change.

The former critical reviews, which purportedly stand at opposite ends, represent a general tendency to gloss over the figurative texture of Rushdie's novels in a hard-pressed effort to recuperate a realistic, socially significant meaning for texts that are highly experimental in nature. As a result, critical reviews along the lines mapped out by M. Keith Booker, who attends to Rushdie's deconstruction of "dualistic

thinking" (977) through the metaphors of "human-beast hybrids" and "mysterious metamorphosis" (980), are quite rare. Certainly, Sara Upstone is alive to the concomitant deterritorialization and appropriation of the traditionally feminine domestic space that ultimately becomes endowed with a magical, cross-gender postcolonial resistance in Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (274). However, when she states that as protagonist "Saleem enters the bathroom or produces the pickle jars, he enacts a politicization and privileging of the domestic that calls into question the gendered division of private and public space," she stops short of reaching out to the intimate enclaves of corporeal identity (Upstone 279). What is required then in the present context for a better understanding of Rushdie's gender politics is to assess the feminist import of such subversive tropes as androgyny and the cyborg, probing meanwhile their unsettling impact on the reader of magic realist narratives.

The Ramifications of Androgyny and the Cyborg

A striking feature about androgyny, which refers to individuals with masculine and feminine attributes, is that its origins stretch back to ancient times and proliferate like a rhizome across cultures. According to Ovid's *Metamorphoses,* an emblematic scene of androgyny involves the willful obsession of the nymph Salmacis with the reluctant god Hermaphroditus, which reached its climax when the "bodies of boy and girl were merged and melded in one. The two of them showed but a single face" (Ovid 149). Such pining for total fusion is reminiscent of Plato's *Symposium*, held in homage to the Greek God of love Eros, where Aristophanes exposed his theory of the origin of the sexes that could be thus summed up:

> Originally, there were three sexes, not two, and we were doubly formed, not individual: male and male, female and female, and male and female. Zeus split the spherical creatures in two as punishment for their arrogance, causing each to experience the loss of the other- a loss that we long to redeem through sexual union, as the once androgynous couple become the procreative heterosexual couple. (Hargreaves 2)

In yet another twist, the Christian narrative of Genesis maintains that Eve was born of Adam's crooked rib, which ultimately accounts for her androgynous name wo*man*, and provides a parallel to the Hindu myth that avers: "First of all Brahma created from his own immaculate substance a goddess known by the name of Sharatuya. When he saw this glorious girl born of his own body, he fell in love with her" (Baudrillard 1988, 67). An original cross-cultural androgynous unity is thus tacitly invoked before man and woman are separated and fated to come together during the furtive moments of heterosexual intercourse that conjoin them temporarily in a choreography performed by a double-faced single body. However, as it is suggested by the myth of

Hermaphroditus and the dual role of Adam as father/lover, the fantasy of reconciliation does not preclude an androgyny of competition whereby the feminine or the masculine side of the union would attempt to claim for itself a primary role.

Steeped as it were in the mists of mythical speculation, the metamorphic androgyny leitmotif seems to have preserved its forceful explanatory power in the light of present-day feminist criticism. Indeed, the postulation of a primordial androgynous duality at the core of human subjects finds a distinct echo in Judith Butler's deconstruction of radical alterity through the concept of the constitutive outside. For Butler, "the subject is constituted through the force of exclusion and abjection, one which produces a constitutive outside to the subject, an abjected outside, which is after all, 'inside' the subject as its own founding repudiation" (3). Thus, the abject deviant bodies, including those of women, which are banished by androcentrism to the realm of nature, beyond the pale of civilization, are in truth embodiments of the feminine Other that is originally inherent to identity, yet has to be expelled for the sake of attaining an impregnable masculine integrity. Along these lines, the constitutive outside which is cast away from the sovereign subject presupposes a former otherness within the self that Butler wishes to endow with a disruptive polymorphous force,[1] while other more conciliatory feminists like Carolyn Heilbrun would harness to the ideal concept of androgyny on the grounds that it is "able to startle us, to penetrate our age-old defenses, and make us aware of the need to give up stereotyped roles and modes of behavior" (Heilbrun, 147). Androgyny, in the latter sense, harbors the potential to undermine gender polarity and to open up new horizons for harmony between man and woman. However, for all its utopian dissidence, androgyny does not seem to exhaust the feminist enduring commitment to an ever more subversive gender politics—a fact that compels Donna Haraway to inquire provocatively: "Why should our bodies end at the skin, or include at best beings encapsulated by the skin" (178)?

Haraway keeps prodding us with more searching questions in the order of: "How can our 'natural' bodies be imagined- and relived- in ways that transform the relations of same and different, self and other, inner and outer, recognition and misrecognition into guiding maps for inappropriate/d others" (3-4)? Her answer to this conundrum assumes that with the demise of the religious creation stories in the Garden of Eden, humans and animals should be perceived as no more than living organisms inscribed in an open circuit of ex-*change* in the dual sense of interaction and mutation. What is more, in the current postmodern techno-culture, humans are no longer organically autonomous, but rather inextricably bound up with machines, which gives rise to monstrous "boundary creatures" (Haraway 2). These bearers of new modes of embodiment are called cyborgs, meaning cybernetic

organisms made up of organic and technological constituents. In this regard, Haraway's theory resonates forcefully with Jean Baudrillard's view that:

> The religious, metaphysical or philosophical definition of being has given way to an operational definition in terms of the genetic code (DNA) and cerebral organizations (the informational code and billions of neurons) […] our being is exhausting itself in molecular linkings and neurotic convolutions. This having been established, there are no more individuals, but only potential mutants. From a biological, genetic and cybernetic point of view, we are all mutants. (*Ecstasy* 50-51)

From this standpoint, there is no room left for the castigation of a post-humanist 'brave new world,' nor for entertaining cultural pessimism[2] as the cyborg is given a new lease on life in Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's notion of assemblage, that protean body without clearly delineated contours, ready to be connected to other entities, that is to say, open to metamorphosis and capable of initiating a veritable sense of becoming.[3]An assemblage, it bears repeating, is "always collective, which brings into play within us and outside us populations, multiplicities, territories, becomings, affects, events" (Deleuze & Parnet, 51). This note of optimism, however, is tempered with Deleuze's caveat that sad affects and bitter resentment are devouring black holes that should be sidestepped if any progress is to be envisioned along unprecedented lines of deterritorialization/ defamiliarization, as we shall see further.

What is of interest in these theoretical approaches to our current shape-shifting times is not their truth-value, which remains debatable, but rather their potential as an imaginative resource to unpack the *modus operandi* of magic realism in experimental fiction. Already critic Eva Aldea has taken up Deleuze's ontology of Being, where the actual and virtual intersect, as an analogue for magic realism with its smooth blending of the fantastic and the real. Aldea further contends that art, according to Deleuze, should reach beyond the "'protective rules' governing our thought in the realm of the actual, rules that indeed, exclude winged horses, fire-breathing dragons- or any other magic" (74). Concurrently, Lois Zamora and Wendy Faris argue for a wide-ranging postmodern sense of liminality, when they write that the "real and imaginary, self and other, male and female: these are boundaries to be erased, transgressed, blurred, brought together, or otherwise fundamentally refashioned in magical realist texts" (6). Likewise, while shifting the critical ground to the politically charged postcolonial context, Stephen Slemon maintains that "magic realist texts tend to display a preoccupation with images of both borders and centers, and to work toward destabilizing their fixity" (412). In an even

more radical feminist sense, the generic fact/fiction interface of magic realism could suggest that gender identities as well involve empirical bodies entwined with affects which are deeply steeped in fantasies, dreams, hopes, and nightmares. As such, while gender-emancipated subjects may picture themselves as levitating above binary logic, the bearers of an unspeakable trauma can only stand witness to their lives as they get warped in eccentric anti-narratives. Seen in this light, Salman Rushdie's magic realism begs the question whether it is liberating, or tragically traumatic for his characters.

Gender Con-fusion in *Midnight's Children* and *Shame*

If we keep to the theory of assemblage, outlined above, which further maintains that in writing "the only question is which other machine the literary machine can be plugged into, must be plugged into in order to work" (Deleuze & Guattari, 4), it would be quite relevant to examine how Salman Rushdie's fiction ties up with the theories of androgyny and the cyborg. To this end, certain manifestations of androgyny shall be held up for critical scrutiny in Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* and *Shame* by tracking down the destinies of protagonists Saleem Sinai, the progenitor of the magical children of Indian Independence, and Sufiya Zinobia, the Pakistani beast inside the beauty. Venturing further afield into the realm of corporeality, the figure of the cyborg finds incarnation in Saleem, the All-India-Radio, and Sufiya, the woman-panther. Such ontological transgression of the tenuous borders between man, woman, human, animal and machine, it is maintained, is what gives a poignant critical edge to Rushdie's fictional exploration of embodied identities.

Featuring as a central trope in *Midnight's Children* and *Shame*, the organic fantasy of androgyny is discerned in the mutually illuminating portraits of Saleem Sinai and Sufiya Zinobia, the respective allegorical embodiments of India and Pakistan. While Saleem is the temporally ambivalent mirror of "that ancient face of India, which is eternally young" (*Midnight* 122), Sufiya is no less versatile as the map or bodyscape of Pakistan. As the narrator of *Shame* points out, "the [gendered] edges of Sufiya Zenobia were beginning to become uncertain, as if there were two beings occupying the same air-space, competing for it, two entities of identical shape but of tragically opposed nature" (*Shame* 235). If we read Saleem's national interface (looking backward to the past as well as forward to the future) in terms of feminine tradition and masculine progress, alongside Sufiya as the beast inside the beauty, it appears that Rushdie tries to overcome gender division by evoking the organic totality of androgyny. Although redolent of gender stereotypes, this charting of the temporal and spatial contours of the nation strives to reconcile the double time and heterogeneous space of newly emergent nations and holds that the

nation-state should invite all its members into the fold of the imagined community because "none of us can be free as long as any of us remain oppressed […] and as long as women are oppressed, men cannot have true freedom either" (Booker, 994).

In fact, Rushdie's most compelling narrative exploration of androgyny is dramatized in the birth of the midnight's children inside Saleem's head. The catalyst in this virtual conception of an imagined community of gifted individuals is Saleem's nose, which acts simultaneously as the instigating phallus and the harboring womb for these new alternative possibilities. At that crucial moment, while hidden in a washing chest of dirty laundry, Saleem had a vision of his adoptive mother seated on a toilet, phoning to and fantasizing about her former husband Nadir Khan. Suddenly, a pajama-cord titillates his nose, he sneezes and "then noise, deafening many-tongued terrifying, *inside his head*! [...] Inside a white wooden washing-chest, within the darkened auditorium of my skull, my nose began to sing" (*Midnight* 162). Thus, midnight's miraculous children are born thanks to Saleem's phallic nose and the washing chest, that "hole in the world" (*Midnight* 156), giving rise to two metaphors laden with the respective attributes of masculinity and femininity.

With this trope, Rushdie seems to represent a prodigious feat of self-fertilization that invokes androgynous myths of pro-creation, while taking a few precautions to mitigate any underlying sense of masculine dominance in an effort to reach some balanced synthesis. In this context, early in the novel protagonist Saleem unabashedly confesses his sexual impotence and identifies with the feminine storyteller Scheherazade, so much so that the offspring of independence become the standard-bearers of a thousand and one possibilities for the Indian nation because that is "the number of nights, of magic, of alternative realties—a number beloved by poets and detested by politicians, for whom all alternative versions of the world are threats" (*Midnight* 217). Ideally then, midnight's children would act as a counter-power to the Phallic Mother of the Nation, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, who was in turn "giving birth to a child of her own" (*Midnight* 418) incarnated in her terrifying newly proclaimed Emergency Rule. Indeed, Rushdie's novel is all about this fierce conflict between Saleem's fecund imagination and Indira's despotic will to perpetuate the dynastic law of her father, Jawaharlal Nehru, ending on ambiguous terms "because it is the privilege and the curse of the midnight's children to be both masters and victims of their times […] and to be unable to live or die in peace" (*Midnight* 463).

As it should be obvious, androgyny curiously turns out to be the attribute of both repressive and emancipatory forces, making it necessary to look for another paradigm to read meaning into Rushdie's text, which is readily available in Donna Haraway's theory of the cyborg. The cyborg goes a step further than androgyny in that it

conjoins nature to culture in more sophisticated ways. Defined by Haraway as "a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction" (149), the cyborg remains faithful to its impure origins. Ironically, it is called a 'faithful blasphemy' (Haraway, 149), for being the offspring of the latest streamlined technologies conjoined to the Utopian impulse embedded in science-fiction. Additionally, whereas androgyny tends to submerge gender difference, the cyborg inscribes it on the surface of the body leading to a radical subversion of the dualistic ontological realms that pertain between man/machine, human/animal, and by extrapolation man/woman. In short, as a postmodern feminist trope, the cyborg figures the interface of humanity/monstrosity to clear a space for a more progressive gender politics. Indeed, Haraway substantiates her belief in the cyborg as *the* emblematic contemporary artifact by claiming for it the status of "a fiction mapping our social and bodily reality and […] an imaginative resource suggesting some very fruitful couplings" (150).

When considered simultaneously, samples from Rushdie's fiction and excerpts from Haraway's "A Cyborg Manifesto" reveal striking similarities. Saleem Sinai, for instance, meets the criteria of a cyborg identity as it is outlined by Haraway. His secular revelation in a washing chest of dirty laundry comprises all the elements of blasphemy, heresy, illegitimacy, and irony, culminating in profane humor. "My voices, far from being sacred, turned out to be as profane, and as multitudinous, as dust. Telepathy, then; the kind of thing you're always reading about in the sensational magazines" (*Midnight* 168), Saleem proclaims. Using his grotesque nose as an antenna, he also comes to catch signals from his fellow midnight's children and to broadcast his doctrine of the third principle that transcends antagonistic dualities. In this way, Saleem translates the religious phenomenon of revelation into the register of magic telepathy and scientific air-wave transmission to infuse hope for survival in a heterogeneous body politic. By swallowing the world and creating a network of communication, he falls into line with Haraway's definition of cyborgs, which being "wary of holism, but needy for connection" (151), thrive on the techno-digestion (163) of all kinds of binary oppositions, including by extension the masculine-feminine dichotomy. Most prominently, what makes the allegory of the cyborg more potent than the fantasy of androgyny is that Saleem as The-Voice-of-India imaginatively outsmarts Indira Gandhi's trick of blackmailing the masses into undergoing sexual sterilization in exchange for a freely offered transistor radio that could only serve as a petty tool of obnoxious State propaganda.

In a parallel, albeit more violent evolution from androgyny to the cyborg, Rushdie's novel *Shame* provides the reader with a detailed account of Sufiya Zinobia's composite genealogy, before she springs to

life from the authorial-narrator's fecund imagination. To create her character Rushdie had recourse to at least three combined journalistic and fictional scenarios. The first one is gleaned from a newspaper account of Anna Muhammad, an Asian girl in London who was slaughtered by her father "because by making love to a white boy she had brought such dishonour upon her family that only her blood could wash away the stain" (*Shame* 115). The second line of descent stems from another London-based Asian girl, who has been the victim of a sexual and racial attack "in a late-night underground train by a group of teenage boys" (*Shame* 117). To complete the picture of androgyny, an incredible story is included about a boy who literally burned with anger, meaning that he "simply ignited of his own accord, without dousing himself in petrol or applying any external flame" (*Shame* 117). Scrambling ever more gender roles to a dizzying point, other intertextual references that go into the making of Sufiya Shakil/Hyder involve a feminization of Robert Louis Stevenson's Dr Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, together with a subversive rewriting of fairy-tale poetics by relocating the beast inside the beauty.

Hence, when Sufiya finally emerges as a first-born girl who should have been a boy in patriarchal Pakistan, she reclaims the masculine violence of her alter-ego in an escalating scenario. First, she attacks two hundred eighteen helpless turkeys that were pestering her family with noise. Afterwards, she bites off the neck of her future brother-in-law during a chaotic wedding ceremony. At this stage, she ceases to resemble the slit-throat "halal chicken" (*Shame* 116), sacrificed by men on "the implacable altars of their pride" (*Shame* 115), and turns into the executioner who perpetrates the avenging deed. In a double gesture of decapitation and castration, this assault on a man's head becomes her trademark in a series of "headless murders" (*Shame* 257) that include four youths whom she seduces to their doom while attempting to release her pent-up sexual frustration, enacting thereby a tragically ironic reversal of Islamic polygamy. As a punishment for this misbehavior, she is bound to the attic, that gothic place of confinement traditionally reserved for mad women, yet she comes to escape mysteriously by breaking the literal as well as the symbolic chains of patriarchy, leaving behind her a gaping hole in a wall. It would appear then that transgressive bodies on the move, while crossing boundaries, shift from deformity to mutation. Through this perpetual motion, women who roam loose disrupt the edicts of social propriety and constitute a threat to the status quo of the body politic that denies them human and political value. Their fate, in other words, is not sealed by coercive exclusion because they never fail to reclaim an uncanny place in civilized society.

Gradually, as it were, Sufiya forsakes her realist character and slips into the corporeality of the cyborg, taking the shape of a woman-panther. Indeed, Donna Haraway's assertion that the "cyborg appears

in myth precisely where the boundary between human and animal is transgressed" (152) sheds light on the predicament of the eccentric Sufiya Zenobia with her marginal, freakish body. Given to understand that she is the embodiment of her family's and the nation's shame for being a first-born girl, who caught brain-fever and turned into an idiot, Sufiya is demonized by a culture "in which the stink of honour is all pervasive" (*Shame* 104). Because long years of "unloved humiliation take their toll" (*Shame* 139), she is transformed from an innocent idiot to "one of those supernatural beings, those exterminating or avenging angles, or werewolves, or vampires, about whom we are happy to read in stories" (*Shame* 197). Reminiscent of folktales about the werewolf, Sufiya's abject, hysterical body leads to her ontological instability. As "the Beast of shame" (*Shame* 236), she embodies the hybridity of the cyborg, whereby the alien non-human alternately swaps places with the human. Allegorically, her intimate kinship with monsters and beasts aims at decentering Man's generic humanity and unmarked body, leaving room for other subjectivities to emerge in the social arena. Rushdie seems in fact to be arguing that alteration is a corollary to alterity, much like Haraway when she states that cyborgs are about "not just literary deconstruction, but liminal transformation" (177).

The ontological indetermination of Sufiya is thus figured through catachresis, which is an abuse of the norms through which we usually apprehend the world. As an inconceivable human-beast hybrid, she possesses a formidable power of retaliation, born of long years of shame and humiliation. No wonder, her narrative trajectory propels her from the status of an aberrant girl, to a woman in a veil, and then to a woman unveiled as a "feral nemesis" (*Shame* 268). Through metamorphosis, an act of imposed dehumanization could then shift into a willed process of evolution, mutation, and survival. Indeed, woman can move from the status of the scapegoat to that of the survivor who rises against the view that biology is destiny. Instead of bemoaning in typical victimhood her stigmatized female body, Sufiya goes on to reclaim an emancipated identity. In this case, her "metamorphosis must have been willed […] So then she had chosen, she had created the beast" (*Shame* 244). What adds more weight to Sufiya's agency is that while demure women must keep their heads downcast and never return the gaze, her power lies in her hypnotic, blazing eyes that seize those male victims doomed to be strangled to death at her own hands. A moment then comes when she turns into an incandescent beast, for her preternatural blushing is no longer the sign of "embarrassment, discomfiture, decency, modesty, shyness, the sense of having an ordained place in the world" (*Shame* 39), but rather a simmering fire that portends a violent explosion.

Sufiya's final transmogrification into a woman-panther aligns her by the same token with other fabulous creatures such as Amazon (woman-warrior) and Medusa (woman-snake), which are being

revalorized from the perspective of marginalized women.[4] It is as if Sufiya retaliates by reclaiming the name for which she was initially stigmatized, demonized and excluded. In this way, she seems to echo Rushdie's outcry of protest in relation to *The Satanic Verses*: "You call us devils…Very well, then, here's the devil's version of the world, of 'your' world, the version written from the experience of those who have been demonized by virtue of their otherness" (*Imaginary* 403). Certainly, Rushdie has far-reaching political motives for depicting Sufiya as the alien monster of science fiction or fantasy-thrillers. His use of fantasy is due to the excruciating pain and trauma of the experiences that rend the oppressed subjects' identities. As in the tradition of the fantastic which hovers between natural and supernatural explanations, Sufiya may be pictured as the alienated woman, the thwarted organism of the body politic that literally turns *alien*. Because estrangement leads to a defamiliarized perception of reality, she metamorphoses, through a crisis of identity, into a freakish, monstrous creature unable to fit squarely into the matrices of dominant patriarchy.

Far from being simply vindictive, this trans-valuation of monsters seems to suggest that self-identity is a chimera. Chimeras are a cross-breed of mythical animals that are of the order of fiction; when designating human beings, they function as literalized metaphors that epitomize the constructedness of identity, its multiplicity and partiality. They are one way of saying that identities are boundary projects, open to the interaction with the Other. With regard to Sufiya Zenobia, the fact that she is an unrecognizable aberration tends to denaturalize essential categorical identities. Her violated head and impaired body are symptoms of irrational perception and abnormal behavior conducive to the subversion of the law/logos with its insistence on coherence, rigor, and discipline in the sense of keeping one's place within bounds. Thus, aware that the eccentric body of the dissident woman is at odds with the organic body politic, Rushdie seems to have injected a heavy dose of fantasy to upset normative male-stream culture.

The Blind Spot in Rushdie's Gender Politics

What finally seems disconcerting for Rushdie's postcolonial agenda, which aspires to combat jointly sexual and political oppression, resides in his abiding ambivalence, an occasional lapse into misogyny, and an unwarranted fascination with violence. Indeed, at the level of characterization, Saleem and Sufiya, as agents of resistance and renewal, leave much to be desired. From a certain perspective, Rushdie seems to grapple with his magic-realist creations, yet ends up either silencing these repressed subjects, or denying them real agency. In *Midnight's Children*, for instance, it is quite uncertain whether Saleem

Sinai represents a free-floating postmodern diversity, or a genuine multiplicity of voices. Much like Sufiya Zinobia's power of vision, Saleem's telepathy is a "shameful deformity" (*Midnight* 166-167), transformed to a deep insight into family and national affairs. However, even with his radio metaphor, Saleem fails to act as an alternative Voice-of-India, not least because of his latent misogynist streak:

> Women have fixed me all right, but perhaps they were never central- perhaps the place which they should have filled, the hole in the centre of me which is my inheritance from my grandfather Aadam Aziz, was occupied for too long by my voices. Or perhaps— one must consider all possibilities—they always made me a little afraid. (*Midnight* 192)

Thus, in line with patriarchal ideology, women are either relegated to a secondary status, or cast as a malefic power. Accordingly, Saleem's potential as a multivalent cyborg that would re-inscribe gender identities is unduly curtailed, for it turns out that even in a gender-problematic, post-humanist age, the masculine subject of liberal humanism still lingers on.

Such an incipient excision of women from the body politic correlates with Saleem Sinai's devastated body in a rather unproductive way. At the end of his trials and tribulations, Saleem proclaims:

> Because in drainage lie the origins of the cracks: my hapless, pulverized body, drained above and below, began to crack because it was dried out. Parched, it yielded at last to the effects of a lifetime's battering. And now there is rip tear crunch, and a stench issuing through the fissures, which must be the smell of death. (*Midnight* 461)

Indeed, the alternative national community of midnight's children fails because Saleem relies excessively on a presumed innocence, a debilitating victimhood, and an apocalyptic imagination. He therefore lays more emphasis on structural constraints than on the politics of agency and survival which are merely vestigial in the text. As far as *Midnight's Children* is concerned, if there are any fleeting beams of hope, they cannot escape "returning to nuclear dust in the manic compulsion to name the Enemy" (Haraway, 151), as Saleem's bitter resentment toward Indira Gandhi together with his final explosion into "specks of voiceless dust" (*Midnight* 463) suggest. Hence, polarity is restored at the scene of implacable antagonism between oppressors and victims, indicating that Rushdie is reluctant to break the vicious circle of violence and seek release; instead, apocalypse must run its course up to the end.

The last point raises the specter of violence, which is all too pervasive in *Shame*. In this novel, Sufiya's aggressive retaliation vacillates ambiguously between two irreconcilable interpretations.[5] On the one hand, she is responsible for her transformation, discovering in herself "a form of inward creativity, during which the subject remakes herself and her world as she chooses" (*Shame* 244). Concomitantly, Rushdie conceives of Sufiya as the embodied unconscious of the oppressed, acting as "a chimera, the collective fantasy of a stifled people, a dream born of their rage" (*Shame* 263). On the other hand, she is possessed by the beast that will ultimately take over her personality and eclipse her out of any meaningful existence. For in the end, "the power of the beast of shame cannot be held for long within any one frame of flesh and blood, because it grows, feeds and swells, until the vessel bursts" (*Shame* 286). As a mere receptacle for shame and violence, Sufiya is thus utterly objectified to be later annihilated. From this perspective, it is more likely that she is not a just agent of retribution, but rather an abject woman penetrated by the masculine beast of violence, which reveals that Rushdie has not totally relinquished his masculine prerogatives. Furthermore, Sufiya is quite ineffectual politically because she is condemned to sending back, like a reflecting mirror, the image of monstrous State power. Trapped in this specular violence, she uncannily replicates the dictatorship of her father, President Raza Hyder. Such characterization is hardly capable of transforming the national body politic because if chaos is the flipside of dictatorship, then the vengeful violence of Sufiya Zinobia is not a viable option for a new, nascent democratic order. Not surprisingly, "the visions of the future, of what would happen after the end," projected by the novel only consist of "arrests, retribution, trials, hangings, blood, a new cycle of shamelessness and shame" (*Shame* 276-277).

Oddly enough, Rushdie has moved this theater of cruelty to the bed in the final scene of love/death consummation between Sufiya Zinobia and her husband Omar Shakil Khayyam:

> [It was] as though she had entertained for that tiny fragment of time the wild fantasy that she was indeed a bride entering the chamber of her beloved; but the furnace burned the doubts away, and as he stood before her, unable to move, her hands, his wife's hands, reached out to him and closed. (*Shame* 286)

As an integral part of the collective shame that has gathered momentum in Pakistan and Rushdie's text, such sadomasochistic relations substitute for love, and the pathology of power overruns healthy interaction. To mitigate the devastating impact of this explosive hi/story, the meta-fictional closing scene of *Shame* unites in

a cloud of smoke Sufiya, Omar, and the narrator in a surreal communion:

> And then the explosion comes, a shock wave that demolishes the house, and after it the fireball of her burning, rolling outwards to the horizon like the sea, and last of all the cloud, which rises and spreads and hangs over the nothingness of the scene, until I can no longer see what is no longer there; the silent cloud, in the shape of a giant, grey and headless man, a figure of dreams, a phantom with one arm lifted in a gesture of farewell. (*Shame* 286)

One is never so sure, though, whether Rushdie's authorial figure is mischievously grinning in the background, or hopefully smiling on the horizon, hoisted all the while beyond the rubble and above the fray. A any rate, Rushdie's protagonists tend to arouse in the reader at best a feeling of empathy, which, with its roots in pathos, is an impotent life-draining affect, and at worst a temptation for vengeful (self)-annihilation. For, while sadness is, according to Deleuze, an accomplice of tyranny as the "established powers have a stake in transmitting sad affects to us […] to make us slaves" (Deleuze & Parnet, 61), the flipside of fascism is no other than terrorism. Deleuze, in this sense, alerts us in a way that does not occur to Rushdie that subversive lines of flight from the reigning doxa might run the risk of "turning into lines of abolition, of destruction, of others and of oneself" (Deleuze & Parnet, 140).

Nevertheless, one could add in defense of Rushdie's poetics that what redeems the pervasive violence, which runs riot particularly in *Shame*, is that by steadily moving away from realism and heading toward fantasy, he is strategically employing shock-tactics to inflict violence on our own familiar, self-evident modes of perception. Rushdie himself has been clear about this point, contending that "metaphor, heightened imagery, fantasy and so on are used to break down our habit-dulled certainties about what the world is and has to be. Unreality is the only weapon with which reality can be smashed, so that it may be subsequently reconstructed (*Imaginary* 122). In the same vein, while invoking the power of non-mimetic narratives for the imaginative reconfiguration of reality, Fawzia Afzal-Khan urges that we must "destroy the old status quo, the world as we know it, *entirely*, before the world can be made habitable for all. The only kind of narrative strategy capable of conveying the burden of such a heavy message seems to be one in which Realism can be diluted, even dispensed with, through the use of mythical and surrealistic fiction" (144). In this reading, Rushdie's transplantation of the fantastic figures of androgyny and the cyborg into otherwise realist narratives operates, with relative success, a deterritorialization/defamiliarization of our world-view as well as a transgression of several boundaries that hold the potential to problematize gender relations.

Conclusion

Salman Rushdie's ambivalent feminist agenda eventually discloses its moments of insight and blindness, which goes to prove that the process of critical interpretation applied to his oeuvre and similar works of experimental fiction can never be perfunctorily laid to rest. When coming up against the androgyne (at once masculine and feminine), the cyborg (a hybrid of organism and machine), and chimera, that monster "with the head of a lion, the body of a goat and a serpent's tail" (*Imaginary* 63), we must then rise up to the challenge of pondering what these freakish bodies have to do with our life, the literature we read and the feminist criticism we bring to bear upon it. An obvious answer could be that these are fantasies that provide us with easy ways of escape from too much reality. Or else, it would appear that those are the ghosts that we wish to exorcise during the short span we spend reading or watching thrillers and science-fiction, for fear that the repressed should rerun to haunt our reality and force us to rethink our relations to that "most alien yet nearest land of all: [our] own body" (Josipovici, 308). Far from appeasing our anxiety, one of Rushdie's ventriloquist narrators proffers half-tongue-in-cheek:

> I repeat: there is no place for monsters in civilized society. If such creatures roam the earth, they do so out on its uttermost rim, consigned to the peripheries by conventions of disbelief … but once in a blue moon something goes wrong. A Beast is born, a 'wrong miracle', within the citadels of propriety and decorum. This was the danger of Sufiya Zinobia: that she came to pass, not in any wilderness of basilisks and fiends, but in the heart of the respectable world. (*Shame* 199-200)

With these enthralling words, which lull us into a false security until the last jolting turn of the screw, it appears that an inevitable transgression of frontiers between the real and the imaginary, the sexual and the social would be set in motion whenever monstrous feminine creatures forsake their place in the shadows of hi-story and set out to impinge, with their nimble feet, on the public sphere. Such a transgression, which weaves a tight bond of solidarity between women and imaginative literature in their mutual effort to reconfigure reality, is reminiscent of Paul de Man's definition of seductive rhetoric as "a disruptive scandal- like the appearance of a real woman in a gentlemen's club where it can only be tolerated as a picture, preferably naked (like the image of Truth), framed and hung on the wall" (15-16). However, one could only wish for Rushdie's ambiguous feminist politics, which invariably

shy away from assertive, unequivocal agency, to catch up with his inventive esthetics of catachresis, clearing along the way a more viable space for inappropriate/d others. To put it in Nicholas Morwood's words, more magic rather than tragic realism would indeed be exceedingly gratifying for Rushdie's postcolonial, feminist reader (2016).

As a postscript to Rushdie's ambivalent gender politics, it is opportune to recall Michel Foucault's statement at the end of *The Order of Things*: "As the archaeology of our thought easily shows, man is an invention of recent date. And one perhaps nearing its end [...] one can certainly wager that man would be erased, like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea" (422). Whether by "man" Foucault meant the abstract, universal subject of liberal humanism, or the all-too-real dominant figure of patriarchal ideology, it seems that his premonition has proved quite prescient, given the emergence, ever since the postmodern 1970s, of an imaginative literature that has fragmented identity beyond recognition and an innovative spate of feminist criticism beckoning toward a post-gender, or even a post-humanist age. Around that time, experimental novels that stretch the boundaries of realism and subjectivity to a breaking point were in abundance such as Ursula Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969) and Angela Carter's *The Passion of New Eve* (1977). Concomitantly, the 1970s were still under the spell of Carolyn Heilbrun's seminal work *Toward a Recognition of Androgyny*, which cut new ground in feminist criticism by positing the utopian dream of gender reconciliation. Although not a full-fledged feminist, Salman Rushdie in the wake of such ebullient atmosphere deftly handled magic realism in his novels *Midnight's Children* and *Shame* to increase, if only relatively, "the sum of what is possible to think" (*Imaginary* 15) in the patriarchal societies of the Indian subcontinent.

Notes

1. In her seminal feminist text *Bodies that Matter*, Judith Butler expounds her theory of the negative constitution of identity, which harbors an inherent subversion from within the dominant socio-cultural paradigm when she states that a "constitutive or relative outside is, of course, composed of a set of exclusions that are nevertheless *internal to* that system as its own nonthematizable necessity. It emerges within the system as incoherence, disruption, a threat to its own systematicity" (*Bodies* 39).

2. Jean Baudrillard's cultural vision of the simulacrum as it is outlined in *The Ecstasy of Communication* and *In The Shadow of the Silent Majority* is overall pessimistic, yet he still holds out hope in a theory of seduction which resonates with Donna Haraway's cyborg and Gilles Deleuze's assemblage when he enquires:

> Where has the body of the fable gone? The body of metamorphosis…—a body freed from the mirror of itself, yet given over to all seduction? And what seduction is more violent than the one of changing species, to transfigure oneself into the animal, the vegetable, the mineral or even the inanimate? (*Ecstasy* 45-46)

3. In defiance of the logic of unity, totality and all sorts of duality, Gilles Deleuze writes in *Dialogues*, which is co-authored with Claire Parent:

> What is an assemblage? It is a multiplicity which is made up of many heterogeneous terms and which establishes liaisons, relations between them, across ages, sexes and reigns—different natures. Thus, the assemblage's only unity is that of co-functioning: it is a symbiosis, a 'sympathy' (69).

4. A prominent feminist transmutation of monsters into charming figures reverberates in Hélène Cixous's voice when she proclaims: "You only have to look at the Medusa straight on to see her. And she's not deadly. She's beautiful and she's laughing" (885).

5. Aijaz Ahmad is more virulent in his criticism of Sufiya as an implausible agent of regeneration or redemption (1991). In his view, although Sufiya is endowed with an extraordinary power of retaliation, she is too physically misshapen and mentally incompetent to effect a significant change in her situation, or in the wider national context. By being disfigured, Sufiya has not become a subversive monster, or an avenging angel, but rather a colonized, mad woman turned into a rapacious animal. Because in all her different guises she invariably acts on the basis of instinctive, atavistic impulses, she seems to lack the required self-awareness to appropriate her radical alterity for survival. In these terms, Sufiya, the country Pakistan, and to a large extent Rushdie's novel are a miracle gone wrong. Certainly, Ahmad

makes some valid points about the conceptual flaws of *Shame,* yet his imaginative scope is limited by a strict adherence to a social realist tradition of criticism that does not settle for any notion of ambiguity or paradox.

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