

Research Article

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Jurate Radaviciute, Devoid of (E)motion: Farah's Story

<https://doi.org/10.1515/culture-2018-0072>

Received April 23, 2018; accepted December 14, 2018

Abstract: This essay investigates the theme of emotionlessness in Salman Rushdie's novel *Shame*; the research is carried out within the theoretical framework of postmodernism. In the novel, otherwise filled with strong emotions such as love, hate and shame, one character, Farah Zoroaster, can be singled out as a person characterised by a lack of emotion. The question raised in this research is about the place of emotionlessness in the narrative of the novel and the functions it performs. It is discovered that although Farah has a unique position in the novel, her story is intertwined with those of other migrant/peripheral characters such as Bilquis Hyder, Eduardo Rodrigues and Omar Khayyam Shakil as opposed to the protagonists of the novel Iskander Harappa and Raza Hyder, who are local/central characters of the novel. However, alongside the narrative lines of her father and Eduardo Rodrigues, Farah Zoroaster's story explores the topic of migration from a perspective of personal freedom and spirituality, which is different from other migrant narratives in the novel. The postmodern nature of the narrative plays with the reader by offering contrasting connotations of the freedom and spirituality attributed to the emotionlessness of Farah, such as narcissism and the absence of personal qualities.

Keywords: Rushdie, postmodern, *Shame*, Farah Zoroaster, emotion.

The story of Farah Zoroaster stands out in the world of Salman Rushdie's novel *Shame* (1995). In this book, dominated by strong emotions such as shame and desire, Farah is unexpectedly devoid of feelings, even characterized by their absence—she is described as “an ice block” (54)—which makes her stand out among the other characters. What does the absence of emotion signify in the midst of an emotion-driven story? This article investigates the features of emotionlessness in Salman Rushdie's novel *Shame* with the focus on Farah Zoroaster's story. As the narrative of the novel evolves around two extreme emotions, shame and shamelessness, Farah's story is considered within the context of emotions by considering comparable and contrastive features of both themes: the lack and the dominance of emotions.

The concept of shame within the context of the novel has been widely discussed by literary critics. The common denominator of the discussion is the division into male and female characters alongside the axis of shame and shamelessness, where female characters are seen as the oppressed ones on whom the feeling of shame is imposed by society, whilst male characters are characterised by the absence of shame which places them in a superior position to the women of the novel. In relation to the fact that women occupy the central position in the novel, the choice of the male narrator is widely discussed by literary critics. For example, Aijaz Ahmad in his work *In Theory* (139) criticises the dominance of the male point of view in the story which overshadows other, traditionally suppressed, voices such as those of women. Similarly, Catherine Cundy (232) and Inderpal Grewal (133) claim that Rushdie asserts the traditional history of oppression rather than offer a voice to those who have long been silenced. More recent works such as Lotta Strandberg's article on the images of gender and Agnes Gyorke's research on the tropes of silence in the novel support

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the dominant approach to the concept of shame in the novel. Strandberg claims that whereas the magic realism employed by Salman Rushdie functions effectively in the portrayal of male dictators, in contrast, when applied to the description of female sexuality, "it gives way to misogynist and patriarchal values" (147). Similarly, Agnes Gyorke asserts that silence which is attributed to female characters acquires negative connotations: "instead of becoming the image of some form of passive resistance, silence is schizoid in the novel" (199). This research touches upon the questions of silence and gender which have been widely discussed in relation to the concept of shame; however, it challenges the established point of view about Salman Rushdie's portrayal of women as the opposite of men within the world of *Shame*. Although the discussion of the novel in this article focuses on a secondary character, Farah Zoroaster, rather than the Hyder women who are central to the story, the portrayal of Farah allows us to raise questions about the uniformity of the description of female characters in the novel and the opposition between men and women.

The family background of Farah Zoroaster places her among the migrant characters of *Shame* such as Omar Khayyam and Bilquis Hyder. Farah's father volunteers to work as a customs officer on a remote frontier, where he arrives with an eight-year-old daughter but without a wife. The circumstances of Farah's upbringing (the absence of a mother figure, uncertainty about the origins of the family) marginalize her in the community of the small town where her father has decided to stay. However, Farah does not seem to be worried about the opinions of the locals. It is her emotional detachment from other inhabitants of the town that earns her the nickname of an ice block.

This indifference towards public opinion places Farah in a unique position in comparison to other characters of the novel—for example, Bilquis Hyder, whose life is determined by the public shame she is subjected to as a result of having to flee her native country. Bilquis is an immigrant to Pakistan from Delhi, India. She leaves her father's home as a result of the explosion of a bomb planted in her father's cinema. The incident leaves Bilquis both fatherless and homeless; what's more, the incident shatters her self-confidence, for she is left in the street naked, as her clothes are torn off in the explosion.

The loss of things causes a major personality shift in a person undergoing displacement. In the case of Bilquis Hyder, an image of wind symbolises her transition between the "thingness" and the "nothingness" of the world. The absence of things in Bilquis' story signals the lack of stability, which is destructive. The tragic nature of the loss of things can be illustrated with an episode from Bilquis Hyder's life. She is forced to leave her home behind when a bomb is planted in her father's cinema. A wind becomes the symbol of this dramatic change:

The walls of her father's Empire puffed outwards like a hot puri while that wind like the cough of a sick giant burned away her eyebrows (which never grew again), and tore the clothes off her body until she stood infant-naked in the street but she failed to notice her nudity because the universe was ending, and in the echoing alienness of the deadly wind her burning eyes saw everything come flying out. (63)

The process of displacement induces a major change through the introduction of multiple negative images: a puri, a wind, the cough of a sick giant, nudity, alienness, infant-naked, a deadly wind, ending. The process is dynamic, for it is presented through multiple action verbs such as puff outwards, burn away, tear off, fly out. Its description reveals the nothingness underlying the concept of displacement, for the wind is said to leave no things in its way: not a thing remains of her father's house; Bilquis herself is absolutely denuded through the loss of her clothes and eyebrows.

Bilquis is overwhelmed with shame due to her exposure to the public gaze after her displacement from her family home to a refugees' shelter:

she was crushed by the reborn awareness of her nudity ... she clutched herself for shame, holding on to herself in that rushing sea as if she were a straw; and felt around her neck the remnants of a length of muslin. The dupatta of modesty had stuck to her body, fixed there by the congealed blood of the many cuts and scratches. (64)

Covering one's body as a reaction to public exposure is first introduced in the episode after the explosion of Bilquis' father's cinema. Its connection to the violence that determines Bilquis' displacement is undeniable. Blood acts as a cover as much as the cloth does: there are just shreds of the material, but alongside cuts

and scratches it provides some cover to protect Bilquis from public shame. Later in the novel the dupatta is replaced with the burqa, which is passed on to both male and female members of the Hyder family: Bilquis' daughter Sufiya Zinobia wears it to escape from her family house to start her killing spree, Raza Hyder, Bilquis' husband, also wears it to hide his identity while he is escaping from a surrounded family house. The element of blood remains an integral part of it through Sufiya Zinobia's burqa soaked in her victims' blood and Raza Hyder's violent death, which concludes his escape from the family estate, thus, connecting it with the concept of migration and the violence that accompanies it.

In contrast to the displacement of Bilquis Hyder which is accompanied by strong negative emotions, Farah does not display any emotional response to being accepted or not being accepted into the local community. Silence or, in Farah's case, a lack of reaction to the outside world, is traditionally seen by literary critics as a response to repression. For example, Agnes Gyorke states that "silence, as a response to repression, registers an existentialist, fallen and bipolar world of the novel" (185). On the other hand, in her work on veiling in India, Daphne Grace asserts that "for women, the basic human right 'to remain silent' has far-reaching connotations; in the Indian context, silence is a possible way to reappropriate space and re-articulate herself" (170). The ambivalence of silence, noted by Grace, manifests itself in a display of positive emotions in the scene of Farah's arrival home at the desert where her father's office is located:

her mood was lightened by the drive, around a spur of the mountains, through a pass in which they were watched by the invisible eyes of suspicious tribals. The emptiness of the frontier pleased Farah, no matter how openly she sneered at her father for having taken this dead-end job. She even began to sing, revealing that she had a melodious voice. (50)

A sense of freedom enhanced by the drive and the emptiness of the surroundings reveal an emotion hidden from the public eye but encoded in Farah's name—which means "joy". The emotion manifests itself actively, emphasized through the use of verbs related to it: lightened, pleased, to sing. Thus, it becomes clear that Farah's silence does not act as a cover to hide her inner struggles, but rather indicates her peace of mind.

The attitude that Farah embraces in this excerpt correlates with the parallel the narrator draws between a migrant and a bird later in the novel:

And I have a theory that the resentments we *mohajirs* engender have something to do with our conquest of the force of gravity. We have performed the act of which all men anciently dream, the thing for which they envy the birds; that is to say, we have flown.

I am comparing gravity with belonging. Both phenomena observably exist ... But neither is understood. We know the force of gravity but not its origins; and to explain why we become attached to our birthplaces we pretend that we are trees and speak of roots. ... Roots, I sometimes think, are a conservative myth, designed to keep us in our places. (85-86)

Gravity, which could be connected to the idea of belonging and to roots holding a person attached to a community or a place, appears to be defeated in Farah's case. Farah is not concerned about her birthplace, nor does she long for it. What's more, she alienates herself from the local community and discovers satisfaction and fulfilment in the emptiness of the desert surrounded by mountains. Although the choice of the place to live is not hers, for it is her father who has made the decision to work in a remote customs-post, Farah embraces the sedentary life which her father leads and makes it her own. Farah's life in the customs-post is not typical of a Muslim woman whose place traditionally is "behind the screen of purdah, within the confines of the *haveli* (women's quarters)" (Grace 160-161). It is also not typical of the women in the novel, for most of them are subjected to either hiding behind the veil (Bilquis Hyder, Sufiya Zinobia) or living in women's quarters (Bilquis Hyder, Rani and Arjumand Harappa). In contrast, Farah lives in the house together with her father, and her everyday life is spent in the company of men: Omar Khayyam and Eduardo Rodrigues. She does not cover her face, and is not confined to women's quarters.

The location of Farah's home is not accidental. The customs-post is the place 'in-between', to use Homi K. Bhabha's term (321); the place which is inhabited by a migrant who no longer belongs to the country of their origin, but it is also not the country they have moved to, for it is not theirs to inhabit. In the novel, the concept of the 'in-between' land is developed through the images of the desert and mountains. The images of the desert and mountains acquire a range of interpretations in this novel in general, whilst Farah's

story contributes to their multiple meanings by adding new ones. The image of mountains as a frontier is introduced in the portrayal of another peripheral character, Omar Khayyam. What's more, in respect to Farah, Omar plays an important role: he is also present in the scene of her arrival in the desert. In contrast to her, Omar is frightened by the frontier and its proximity to the mountains: "And as they neared the border, Farah's spirits rose while Omar's fell His fear of the Edge mounted, irrationally, as they drove, as he sat behind her ... At the frontier: cloud, fainting fit, water sprinkled on the face, reawakening, whereamI" (50).

The edge of things takes different forms in the novel: in Omar Khayyam's world it is mountains that represent a limit between the world of things and their absence. Since childhood, Omar has perceived the mountains as the edge of things, beyond which there is nothing, a void. A two-fold meaning of the image is revealed in the description of Omar's childhood when he differentiates between the mountains which have a massive physical presence that he observes in daytime, and the void beyond them that he experiences in his nightmares:

Omar Khayyam surveyed the emptiness of the landscape around Q., which convinced him that he must be near the very Rim of Things, and that beyond the Impossible Mountains on the horizon must lie the great nothing into which, in his nightmares, he had begun to tumble with monotonous regularity. The most alarming aspect of these dreams was the sleep-sense that he plunges into the void. (22)

The horror at the encounter of the void results in Omar's decision to choose the indeterminacy of the mountains over the void; therefore, he makes a resolution to reduce his sleeping-time drastically. The substitution of wakefulness for sleep brings about the side-effect of the indeterminacy of the substitute despite the determination of Omar's decision, for he is unable to control the process of sleep under the changing circumstances of his life later.

By contrast, the portrayal of Farah adds a positive connotation to the image of mountains and also relates it to another natural image—the desert—which appears in the novel only in relation to Farah and her immediate family. Her surname, Zoroaster, refers to the ancient mystical religion Zoroastrianism, which preceded Christianity and Islam. Farah makes a reference to the religion in her monologue about her father: "He thinks one day we will return to where we have never been, that damn land of Ahuramazda, and this no-good Irani frontier is the closest we could get" (48). Ahuramazda is the chief god, who represents all the virtues in Zoroastrianism. Traditionally, sacred places associated with the worship of this god are located in remote areas, usually in mountains. Thus, the frontier where the customs-post is located acquires the meaning of a frontier between the secular and the sacred, guarded by two recluses—the customs-officer father and the daughter.

The theme of spirituality is not restricted to the portrayal of the Zoroaster family. Another character who appears in the novel alongside them is Eduardo Rodrigues, Farah's teacher. To a certain extent his portrayal also contributes to the spiritual aspect of migration. Although Rodrigues is not related to Zoroastrianism and the Christianity he practises is only briefly mentioned in the story, his professional abilities extend beyond teaching a particular subject—Rodrigues becomes a spiritual guide for his students, opening up their potential and steering them towards the future. As the narrator explains with regard to Eduardo's influence on Omar Khayyam's life: "Eduardo was a far-sighted teacher, and no mistake. And Omar Khayyam, who had picked Rodrigues for his father, never once considered going against his tutor's will. This is how lives are made" (49).

Being a postmodern novel, *Shame* does not allow us to get used to fixed meanings. The validity of a name, which provides an insight into the religious implications attributed to Farah's family name, is questioned by postmodern theorists. For instance, Jacques Derrida claims:

proper names are already no longer proper names, because their production is their obliteration, because the erasure and the imposition of the letter are originary ..., because the proper name was never possible except through its functioning within a classification and therefore within a system of differences, within a word retaining the traces of difference. (Derrida, *Of Grammatology* 109)

Functioning within the system of differences subjects a proper name to the play of meanings which both draws on the origins of the sign and produces new meanings in the process of that play, transgressing the

supposed original background. Thus, Farah's idealized image is questioned during the trip Omar takes to the customs-post where Farah lives together with her father:

[Omar] notices that broken pieces of mirrors have been tied to many of the posts with pieces of string; as Farah approaches each fragment she sees shards of herself reflected in the glass, and smiles her private smile. Omar Khayyam Shakil understands that his beloved is a being too self-contained to succumb to any conventional assault; she and her mirrors are twins and need no outsiders to make them feel complete ... (Rushdie 52)

The isolation which Farah subjects herself to transforms her into a Narcissus rather than a hermit: she becomes fascinated with herself and thus unwilling to communicate with the outside world. Her rootlessness, which has appeared to be the highest level of freedom, providing her with a possibility of defeating gravity, also turns her into a self-absorbed individual who is fascinated by herself.

The image of glass/ a mirror introduces the topic of transparency, which is significant within the theoretical framework of postmodernism. It is explored by Jean Baudrillard: in his work *The Illusion of the End*. In the discussion of the postmodern nature of Evil, he maintains that transparency is the result of the loss of substance and the image as a reference to basic reality: "they [things] lose their image, their mirror, their reflection, their shadow, when they no longer offer any substance, distance or resistance, when they become both immanent and elusive from an excess of liquidity and luminosity" (Baudrillard, *The Illusion of the End* 40). The loss of substance and the transformation into a simulacrum correlates to the theme of silence which dominates the portrayal of Farah: she does not make any decisions, express her point of view or take an active part in anything. In contrast to Omar Khayyam who, in spite of being a passive observer, is also curious about the world, Farah does not appear to be interested in what is happening outside her personal space; what's more, the novel does not provide any representation of her inner monologue, which might signify an intense inner life. Silence and absence dominate in her portrayal.

The topic of a father-figure is relevant to Farah's story. *Shame* plays with the concept of multiple parents: for instance, Omar Khayyam has three mothers and no father, which results in his lifelong search for a father as well as his own failure to be one. In contrast, Farah does not have a mother but has two father-figures: the customs-officer Zoroaster and her teacher Eduardo Rodrigues. Despite their different professional backgrounds, the two "fathers" have multiple similarities: both are migrants who live secluded lives; both are related to religions which are not dominant in the town they live in, the customs-officer being associated with Zoroastrianism and Rodrigues with Christianity; both of them appear to be detached from their past—nobody has any idea where they came from or why.

The description of Eduardo Rodrigues's home gives an insight into his deliberately rootless existence:

On his walls he hung a crucifix, and also glued up a number of cheap pictures ... [Omar and Farah] saw no signs of anything more personal; it seemed as if Eduardo were hiding his past from the fierce rays of the desert sun, to prevent it from fading. Such was the blinding emptiness of the teacher's quarters. (47)

It seems that, having migrated, Rodrigues has chosen to disregard his past and create a new life. However, the theme of rootlessness in the portrayal of the teacher, like the depiction of Farah, correlates to the theme of absence: just like Farah, Rodrigues does not have personal features which would distinguish him as an individual. It is true that both Farah and Rodrigues are noticeably different from the rest of the community, but the difference lies in the absence rather than the presence of personal qualities. Similarly, Farah's father, the customs-officer, appears devoid of personal features; his existence is limited to the desert while his participation in the life of the community or in his daughter's life is very marginal.

A reference to the desert connects the two fathers at the level of the absence of things as well as the absence of content: having fled or migrated both of them chose to be detached from their past in an extreme way by erasing it completely. However, every act of erasure leaves traces which are bound to emerge at a moment of crisis.

Desire is an important element in the postmodern theoretical discourse. According to Baudrillard, the formation of a simulacrum requires an illusion of the real to be complete. The discourses used to supplement the lack of reality are two: the discourses of crisis and desire (Baudrillard, *Simulations* 42).

The discourse of desire is manifested through the use of hypnosis in Farah's story. Unable to win her love, Omar employs hypnosis to interest her and eventually has a sexual intercourse with her when she is in a trance. The application of hypnosis triggers the discourse of crisis and a dynamic play of supplements.

The indeterminacy of the use of hypnosis is revealed through an inner monologue of Omar Khayyam afterwards:

Omar Khayyam tried, futilely, to find consolation in the fact that, as every hypnotist knows, one of the first reassurances in the hypnotic process, a formula which is repeated many times, runs as follows:

'You will do anything that I ask you to do, but I will ask you to do nothing that you will be unwilling to do'.

'She was willing', he told himself. 'Then where's the blame?' (52)

The indeterminacy attributed to hypnosis here reminds us of the concept of *pharmakon* discussed by Derrida in his 1972 article on Plato's *Phaedrus*. Derrida questions the assertion that Plato makes a clear distinction between the constituents of binary oppositions. Interpreting the use of the word *pharmakon* (which stands for writing) in the *Phaedrus*, Derrida stresses that not Plato but the translator of the original text attached a negative meaning to the word, while in ancient Greek *pharmakon* had two meanings: "poison" and "medicine." Overlooking the positive meaning of the word, the translator changed the meaning of the whole concept of writing that Plato developed in the *Phaedrus*. Looking for more proof to support his claim, Derrida turns to the mythology of Ancient Greece. There is Thoth, the god of writing, who is an ambivalent rather than negative figure and whose main feature is indeterminacy, which allows for substitution and play (Derrida, *Dissemination* 94).

In the novel hypnosis is both a cure which addresses Omar's need for love and a poison, for he does not feel certain about the moral aspect of its application. In Farah's case, the function of hypnosis is even more ambiguous than in Omar's. His suggestion to put her under hypnosis arouses an unusually emotional reaction in Farah: as the narrator points out "for the first time in history, she looks at him with interest" (52). What the reasons for her interest in hypnosis are remains unclear; however, she allows Omar to hypnotise her.

The appearance of hypnosis as a supplement for love triggers a sequence of supplements. Jacques Derrida maintains that

through the sequence of supplements a necessity is announced: that of an infinite chain, ineluctably multiplying the supplementary mediations that produce the sense of the very thing they defer: the mirage of the thing itself, of immediate presence, of originary perception. (Derrida, *Dissemination* 157)

Omar's application of hypnosis in order to have intercourse with Farah without considering her consent starts a chain of events. Farah is thrown out of her house by her father, but then is offered a protection by her supplementary father, Eduardo Rodrigues, who marries her, thus becoming her father-husband and the adoptive father of her unborn child. The child's biological father, Omar Khayyam, pretends to have nothing to do with Farah's pregnancy and even secretly hopes that Rodrigues might be the biological father of the baby, thus extending the fantasy of his own innocence.

The dynamic nature of the crisis manifests itself through multiple action verbs (expel, throw out, take, pull, fight, marry, dismiss, leave) and the descriptions of emotions. The ice-cold Farah starts "pulling and fighting" when Rodrigues drags her to the church to get married (Rushdie 52). The crisis triggered by the chain of supplements does not stop here: Rodrigues is dismissed from the school and is forced to leave the town together with his new wife. Despite his own assurances that Rodrigues might be a biological father of Farah's baby, Omar's feeling of guilt "made him shake in the middle of breakfast and go hot in the night and cold in the day and sometimes cry out for no reason in the street" (53).

The crisis has a major effect on Farah: she becomes overwhelmed with emotions. What's more, as a result of the change of her state, she also acts submissive for the first time in the narrative: despite her protest, Farah marries Rodrigues and leaves the town with him against her will. Consequently, by allowing emotions to take control of her life, Farah transforms into a woman who resembles other female characters like Bilquis Hyder: she loses her power to manage her own life.

Farah's return to the town and to the customs-post signals an attempt to reestablish order. In contrast to other characters—for example, Bilquis Hyder—Farah is not transformed by the crisis and the chain of supplements it has set off. She returns to her initial state: no husband, no child, no emotional instability. She comes back to her emotionless self which is fascinated by her own image and unconcerned about people around her: “on her rare visits to the bazaar she made her purchase without looking anyone in the eye, pausing only to gaze at herself in every available mirror with a frank affection” (55). Her alienation from society seems to be complete: no emotional attachments, no verbal communication with villagers. Farah distances herself physically too, by settling in to the customs-post and coming into the village only on rare occasions to buy provisions. However, the situation has inevitably altered the lives of other people involved: Omar has left town feeling guilty for inducing a dramatic sequence of events and also for his behaviour; Rodrigues and the child disappear to never emerge again, Farah's father goes insane and completely alienates himself from society.

To sum up, Farah Zoroaster's story is an integral part of the overall narrative of Salman Rushdie's *Shame*. Although the absence of emotion and the static description of Farah stands out in an otherwise emotional and dynamic story, this line of narrative adds to the theme of migration, one of the central themes of the novel. Through contrast and comparison with other migrant characters such as Bilquis Hyder, Farah's father and Eduardo Rodrigues, Farah introduces the aspect of migration as the act of freeing oneself from belonging to a place or a group of people. If Bilquis is unable to achieve the freedom of being and continues to search for a sense of belonging somewhere, Farah Zoroaster and, to a certain extent, both her fathers are able to achieve freedom by severing all the links tying them to the past and alienating themselves from the new communities they live in.

The experience of living in a state of complete freedom is both elevating and destructive. The theme of religion that emerges through the images of a crucifix, a desert and mountains adds a spiritual level to the idea of freedom: a completely free individual is compared to a hermit who sacrifices his/her secular life in order to defeat the “thingness of life” by refusing to be a part of it. However, the postmodern nature of the novel does not allow the reader to succumb to an illusion of the sanctity of the person. Having alienated herself from society, Farah becomes narcissistic in her love of her own image, which is a simulacrum that bears no resemblance to reality. Fascination with her own image is paired with a void beyond the image: Farah seems to be devoid of any personal qualities, and so are her father and Eduardo Rodrigues.

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