

ENVIRONMENTAL CRISIS: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF SALMAN RUSHDIE'S SHALIMAR THE CLOWN AND THE BOOK OF ISAIAH

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ABSTRACT

One of the major crises that the world faces today is the environmental crisis that has prompted us to think of our responsibilities towards Mother Earth and the safer choices people have to make. Modern environmentalism can be said to begin with the publication of *Silent Spring* by Rachel Carson in 1962. The work mingled ecological science with literature, bringing about a new inter-disciplinary area called as 'Ecocriticism'. To quote Glotfelty, "... ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (xix). Though environmentalism evolved recently, a number of distinct eco-philosophies have emerged with its own understanding and approach to the environmental crisis. This research paper aims in tracing the modern environmental crisis in Salman Rushdie's *Shalimar the Clown*.

Keywords: Crisis, Environmentalism, Physical, relationship, Ecological

There are four major forms of environmentalism: Deep Ecology, Ecofeminism, Social ecology and eco-Marxism and finally, Heideggerian ecophilosophy. Among these four radical forms, Deep Ecology has become the most influential one and has inspired many activists in organizations such as "... Friends of the Earth, Earth First! and Sea Shepherd" (Garrard, 23).

The philosophical guru of Deep Ecology is the Norwegian professor, Arne Naess who lives out his philosophy. Deep Ecology is one philosophy that is not restrictive of regions. Unlike some theories that do not blend in with the concepts other than that of the West, Deep Ecology is a ‘philosophy’ that could be followed by anyone. It is flexible in that it can be adapted to each person’s uniqueness and that is why Naess says there isn’t one path to lead a deeply ecological life. Hence Deep Ecology can be applied to literary works as well.

Salman Rushdie is one of the greatest contemporary writers whose works have been analyzed using a number of theories such as Postcolonialism, Postmodernism, Marxism, Ecocriticism and many more. The theory of Deep Ecology can also be used to analyze his works, as Rushdie’s novels are concerned with one of the major problems, human identity in the Postmodernist and Postcolonial context. His characters experience alienation, hybridity, displacement, multiculturalism and are always in the process of the quest for their Identities. Experiencing Identity Crisis and trying to carve an Identity for himself or herself can be seen in all of Rushdie’s protagonists and most of the other characters as well. According to Deep Ecology, the Identity of a person is inextricably linked to the person’s environment. Rushdie’s works also show this connection, that human beings cannot exist in isolation. Human consciousness is a conglomeration of the environment. It is a product of the physical-socio-historical-economic matrix in which a person lives and grows. Hence, displacement from one’s surroundings will result in Identity Crisis.

Rushdie has a vast canvas and his works give way to a plethora of meanings and interpretations. His characters are deeply embedded in their environments and acquire their identities from the places that they live in. Shorn of their surroundings, they lose their identities. They are deeply connected with the land and hence the land mirrors their condition. One work that prominently foregrounds the humans’ connection with their environment, and the consequences that

humans face when they destroy nature or commit actions that violate goodness, is *Shalimar the Clown*.

Salman Rushdie's *Shalimar the Clown* is a novel whose characters are deeply ingrained in their environment. The crux of the plot happens in Kashmir, a place renowned for its natural beauty. The story revolves around the indigenous community of a small village named Pachigam in Kashmir. The people live a life that is in complete harmony with nature. They are people who realize the interdependency of every life form in our planet earth. A number of characters problematize their names and try to give themselves new names. Names being markers of identity, the act of renaming signifies the attempt to carve new identities. Moreover, the people's identities are linked with their beloved Kashmir. Abdullah Noman, the village headman of Pachigam identified himself amidst the birds of the village. Later, when violence came into Pachigam and the entire place changes, it leads to Identity Crisis in Abdullah. The beliefs and hopes that he had had earlier are shaken and the earlier majesty passes and he becomes a mere shadow of his earlier form.

Noman Sher Noman was a boy brought up in the lap of nature. He is so in tune with nature that when he wants to calm himself, he climbs trees. His profession of clowning and walking on the tight rope was learnt by practicing amidst nature and trees. Later when Boonyi deserts him, the harmonious life the people led until then broke. Many changes came into their place, their home and all these changes were responsible for the Identity Crisis of Noman alias Shalimar who then tries to carve a completely opposite and dangerous identity for himself by going out for revenge.

Boonyi, the link between all the important characters in the novel, at first does not realize the importance of her native land. She thinks that the life is claustrophobic and uses the first chance to escape from her native land. But soon she realizes how important her Kashmir was, along

with the beloved family and friends she had left behind. Earlier she had had a strong identity, but after becoming the Ambassador's mistress, she finds herself alienated. Later when she returns to Kashmir also, it is literally the flowers of Kashmir that save her life. When science and its developments come in with projectors and screens, the *bhand panther* of the village of Pachigam loses its livelihood of performing plays. Thus, it leads to the people's loss of cultural identity as well.

India is the illegal daughter of Max Ophuls, former American ambassador to India. As a child she did not know her birth parents as well as the place of her birth, which had created a void inside her. When she finds out the identity and story of her mother's life and the land she belongs to, she begins to understand the part of herself that has been troubling her. India's identity crisis is because she is not connected to the land and environment, and it is the cause of her rootlessness. Later when she finds out the identities of her parents and her connection to Kashmir, she carves a new identity for herself.

Max Ophuls, a survivor of the Nazi regime, has to mask himself and fakes various identities in order to survive. In doing so, he experiences Identity Crisis and loses touch with his real self and his land and these masks become reality for him. Only once, when he witnessed the Himalayas, all his pretences fell down in awe of Nature. But the feeling of fragility in comparison to Nature unnerved him and so he reassured himself of his power and secretive nature and the moment passed without impact.

The people of Pachigam led a happy life amidst their traditions and practices paying due respect and care towards nature. Their livelihoods are dependent on nature and they only took what was necessary. Learning from the lap of nature, they were good human beings who helped each other out in times of trouble. Genuine love and care overflowed and all of them lived together as one family. Nature had taught them the beautiful truth of co-existence. There was no

hierarchy, for every single person was given equal importance. Everyone had the equal right to develop themselves and there were no discriminations based on religion, caste or sex. The value of 'Biospherical Egalitarianism' was naturally inherent in this community of indigenous people. They understood the philosophy of Interdependency of all living forms on the Earth. It was indeed an ideal place to live, a veritable paradise.

Ancient communities had various traditions and rituals that revered Nature and this automatically made people to protect their environment. Their folktales also incorporated the indigenous species of flora and fauna. This can be seen in Pachigam also where the birds are considered to be souls of ancestors and snakes are believed to bring luck. Nazarébaddoor, the tribal woman, taught the villagers that Nature did not exist to serve every whim of human beings. She was a protector of the forests and allowed people to take only necessities from Nature.

In nature, there are no boundaries, but all lines are blurred, they are shadow lines. The village of Pachigam too had broken down the narrow walls that petty men put up in their selfishness and arrogance. These people embodied 'Unity in Diversity' and never clashed for their different religions and cultures. Despite their numerous differences, they were united to oneness by the bond of '*Kashmiriyat*', that they were all Kashmiris. All the labels remained descriptions and never became divisions in the paradisiacal Kashmir. Hence it was the land that united them, tied them together and helped them lead a noble life. The marriage between the Muslim Noman and Hindu Boonyi, with the full support of the entire village of Pachigam, is in itself an excellent example for their bond.

Paradises it seems are bound to be lost and this paradise too started facing threats. The army with its unnatural materials of war pollutes the land physically. This condition is also mirrored by the people as these external forces contaminate their minds. Even more, the mood of the

people in the village is reflected by Nature. When Boonyi and Shalimar's lecherous behaviour is brought to the notice of the elders by the spy Gopinath, the people's anxiety is reflected by the livestock. The incidence of Partition brings darkness to the land. Doubts and fear spread and the only thing that heartens and comforts them is their unity and goodness because of their connection with their land. The army started occupying more and more of the land, bringing in violence. In the name of 'protecting' the land, they actually plundered and looted it. The people as well as the land suffered.

In spite of a number of changes for the worse, the villagers held together in their principles. Science and its machinery became popular, leading to the loss of many indigenous populations's livelihood. Many enemies cropped up, and brought in divisions by claiming to protect one group or division. The army made the natives voiceless and the only thing that mattered was the 'official' point of view. Oppression of the poor and the weak began. Everyone was paralyzed with the fear of the dangers that could happen at any time and this fear is also felt by the land. Just as how the people could not do anything productive or free, the land too did not yield its usual amount of produce, because of fear. The fear even killed the livestock, which died without any apparent reason.

Everything was going downhill in Pachigam, but the death blow occurred when Boonyi left her native land and beloved family to become the American Ambassador's mistress. The people of Pachigam had lived as one family and when Boonyi left, the magic circle that held them all together completely broke apart. In a world where everything was growing apart, the people of Pachigam had shown the meaning of unity through the marriage of Boonyi and Shalimar. When Boonyi left, she smashed everything that Pachigam and Kashmir had stood for. The meaning of Kashmiriyat was lost and the people who had until now held up against the enemies, fell apart.

The enemies became stronger and infiltrated the land, brainwashing the minds of young men and bringing about divisions. People who had been friends for so long started looking at each other with mistrust because of the other's religion. Boonyi also realized her mistake soon enough. The connection with the land broken, violence and evil filled the land as well as the people. The village of Pachigam broke down to the force of its enemies; the people as well as the land were destroyed; Paradise was lost.

This storyline of Kashmir can be connected to that of the Book of Isaiah in The Old Testament of The Holy Bible that narrates the history of the Jews from their forefather Abraham. The land of Canaan was their 'promised land'. It was a very prosperous land and was bestowed by God to the Israelites. However, the people of Israel sinned and committed acts of violence, oppressing the poor, coveting other people's property, did not give out justice, and dwelt in corruption. Because of their sins, the darkness in their actions and souls, the Paradise they were living in was cursed. They lost their Paradise with the land being cursed not to yield its fruits. Because of their sins, external forces overwhelmed the Kingdom of Judah and the people as well as the land were captured by their enemies. Hence here also the condition of the land reflected the people, and the people's actions, be it good or bad was also reflected by the land.

God made man to live amidst nature and not in a concrete jungle. This is the reason why Adam and Eve were placed in an earthly paradise which was a garden. God also gave man the responsibility of taking care of the environment. Man's duty is to realize the importance of every creation and admire and take care of them all. God equally loved all His creations and that is why He saved not just Noah but also every other species. Whenever the land is burdened with sin, the earth's magnificence will be lost. So, God once again recreates a new and pure land. It is clearly seen that Nature and Human beings are not separate from each other but that every species living on the earth be it an insect, a tree, an animal, a bird, a human, they are all

inter-related and are all dependent on each other. Every single species has its own unique space in the earth without which the beauty of creation would not be complete. This is why Deep Ecology talks of the equal value, intrinsic value, ingrained in every living and non-living form on the earth. Everything hangs together and everything is linked to everything else in an inextricable network. No one creature can dominate but all together a holistic world can be created. In order to lead a fruitful and happy life everyone must be deeply ecological in each and every act of our lives.

It is important that the right path is chosen. It is not just knowledge that is needed but wisdom, to make the right choices and carry out our responsibilities. Care and love should flow towards every being, naturally; then the land, Mother Earth will be as beautiful as the hearts of the people inhabiting the planet. The people and the land will mirror each other's goodness. Thus, it is apt to conclude with the words of Arne Naess, "... it is time to share with all life on our maltreated Earth through the deepening identification with life forms and the greater units, the ecosystems, and Gaia, the fabulous, old planet of ours" (24).

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