

The Voice of the Silenced in Salman Rushdie's *Shame*, Caryl Phillips's *Foreigners: Three English Lives*, and Colum McCann's *TransAtlantic*

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the implications of history in Salman Rushdie's *Shame* (1983), Caryl Phillips's *Foreigners: Three English Lives* (2007), and Colum McCann's *TransAtlantic* (2013). History plays an important role in discriminating and distinguishing the proper characteristics of certain nations and people of a specific historical era. The purpose of the current paper is to scrutinize the historical components in the selected novels. These novels incarnate the authors' visions of the silenced minorities depicted in the fictional plots. They embody the sense of individual sufferings at the time of human devastation and retardation caused by historical events. In essence, my study focuses on the authors' abstract voices which are uttered through the fictional characters' dialogic voices. That is, the authors portray the neglected and suppressed voices which need alleviation and freedom. Thus, the authors do not tend to express their authorial voices directly in the novels. Instead, they convey their literary meanings through the characters' voices. Thus, my analysis will focus on both the authors' implied voices and their manifestation in the characters' direct fictional voices. The methodological analysis of the study will concentrate on the way by which the authors present the peculiarities of their fictional characters and discourses.

Key words: Dialogic Novel, History, Marginalization, Setting, Silenced Voices

INTRODUCTION

History is the material record of time. In ancient periods, history used to be a documentation of some human chronicles and adventure episodes. By time, history gained prominence since it is connected with religions and some mythical rituals. Accordingly, history became a part of human civilization since almost the fifth century B.C. people felt the necessity of recording their lives' events and new changes; and history became a critical means by which they could refer to their ancestors and leave some important information to their forthcoming posterity (Leitch, 2001, p.123).

In fact, historical episodes vary and the possibility of constructing human concerns with life's needs emerged out. In ancient civilizations, the use of parchment or other writing devices gives us a picture of how human beings reacted to history. Then, history came into another phase. The ancient eras were concerned with the abstract, or virtual, meaning of history. They did not take the material aspect of history as the proper documentation of their lives. History became material i.e., historical documentation switched on to be recorded in advanced chronicles, libraries, periodicals, lecture and so forth (Leech, 1981, p.15).

The fact that history became an integral part of human life resulted in something radical in thought. People used

history to refer to their previous existence on a certain region to claim, for example, their rights to dwell their ancestors' lands. Yet, the new profound concern with history brought about tangible studies of historical periods over the time. New methods been developed, and history became more contiguous with people's needs. Consequently, new scholarly enterprises evolved. Among these enterprises are the fictional writings. Such writings reflect history in an objective manner. They deal with history in the light of reality which they try to portray. They resulted in totally different records of historical facts and events. Literary authors, therefore, use history to tackle the daily issues in human lives (Kundera, 1986, p.36).

This essay is going to study focus on the historical insights in Salman Rushdie's *Shame* (1983), Caryl Phillips's *Foreigners: Three English Lives* (2007), and Colum McCann's *TransAtlantic* (2013). The study will mainly shed light on the suppressed voices in these novels. The novels are the authors' fictional agents which express and convey the authorial meanings in the literary context. Thus, the authors' abstract voices will be studied in the light of the characters' textual speeches because they are the real documentation of the authorial intention and his vision of history. In this respect, the authors' visions are going to be discussed

as the authors' real conceptualization of history. And history will be studied as the voice of the silenced people portrayed in the novels' plots. These people symbolically embody the real people outside the literary texts. Therefore, the analysis will mainly shed light on the characters' discourses and personalities and how they exemplify the authors' fictional ideologies. In so doing, the study tries to explore the suppressed and marginalized voices in the selected works' contexts.

SALMAN RUSHDIE'S *SHAME*

Salman Rushdie's *Shame* is a novel that concentrates on a person who dislikes women. Rushdie opens the story by describing the setting. Rushdie sets the novel on a demarcation line between Pakistan and Afghanistan. He directs the narrative on three sisters who rear up a son named Omar Khayyam. They teach him confidence and instruct him not to succumb to shame, the synonymous word 'sharam' in Arabic language. Because of this teaching, Omar becomes interested in women sexually, and he leads a debauchery life, especially in his relations with women. Rushdie puts conflict into the events when another fictional character is suspicious of Omar and his desire to live in debauchery. Yet, the notion of debauchery is close to the theme of shame in the novel, for it is seen in another character. One of the fictional characters, who is twin to another, takes on the shame of the world and becomes a 'Beast' symbol. Omar gets married to her, and later this marriage paves the way for his death. By the end of *Shame*, Sufiya, Omar's wife, kills him. She decapitates him abruptly.¹

In the context of fictional writings, historical authors introduce such historical genres as a reflection to pinpoint their "visions" capacity for absorbing their fictional settings as an "indication of history" (Vattimo, 1991, p.136). The fictional element which authors of history utilize is their "narrative" performance of fictional texts. This brings about an "embodiment" of the historical vision of time. By the same token, the author can express his/her historical insights through narrative self-awareness; whereby reality could be accentuated by the author's implied voice (p.136). The textual presentation of history is evident in *Shame*. It is the differences between the present and the past lives, exactly when at the time of Omar Khayyam: "Omar Khayyam Shakil were using the past, there only remaining capital, as a means of purchasing the future" (p.19). The mature ambivalence of history writings has been born out of the historical and literary unity. The various "high" and "low" aspects of setting are also decisive in the succession of merging the "multiple genres" of "historical" events (Tracy, 1994, p.191). Consequently, history involves the historical background of the text (p.189).

Constructing setting textuality is arguably connected to time conceptualization. The historical mentality places heavy emphasis on the "relative vision" the suppressed voices (Tracy, 1994, p.5). Viewing history from a subjective perception depends on the personal interpretation and "comprehension of what is going in the world" (p.5). History, likewise, is indispensable because the fictional setting technique "refuses to limit truth to its rational dimension and thus dethrones the human intellect as the arbiter of truth.

There are other valid paths to knowledge besides reason. including the emotions and the intuition. the historical mind" involves two separate time periods at the same time (Toolan, 1988, p.7). In *Shame*, this notion of this setting temporality embodies Omar Khayyam's social interaction with contemporary characters, like Chand Mohammad: "the last person to whom Omar Khayyam spoke before making his escape from the town of shame was a certain Chand Mohammad" (p.100). Omar here has some suppressed voices which he wants to express for people. He is considered a minor person in society. This is the real cause of his poor state. He does not have a good voice to express his freedom.

In its highly critical mediation on history and setting, fictional setting is set on the "macro view" of history which spreads through social and cultural "facets of life" (Shostar, 1995, p.7). Notwithstanding, the most important need for conceiving history involves "the world is not simply an objective given that is historical, lies at the heart of the unknown; setting is relative, indeterminate, and representative time periods" (p.7). In addition, knowledge is another fundamental component of conceiving the essence of history. In the same manner, "history cannot be merely objective. because the universe is not mechanistic and dualistic but rather historical, relational and personal" (p.8). This is close to Omar Khayyam's date of birth in *Shame*: "born in a death-bed, about which there hung (as well as curtains and mosquito-netting) the ghost image of a grandfather who, dying, had consigned himself to the peripheries of hell; his first sight the spectacle of a range of topsy-turvy mountains" (p.21). Hence, the birth of Omar Khayyam encompasses two temporal periods. Here the historical fact of Omar is almost meager. He is thrown into a merciless community where he does not seem to be separated from it. On that account, he is one of the silenced voices in the novel.

This historical view of setting is merely a challenge to conventional view of history. In setting episodes, the reliance on the thematic aspect of history and the subjective perception of it is "connected with setting" (Rivkin and Ryan, 2004, p.10). As a matter of fact, "community" is a challenging environment which can affect our impression of truth where "the setting worldview operates with a community-based understanding of truth. It affirms that whatever we accept truth and even the way we envision truth is dependent on the community in which we participate" (8).

Furthermore, the primary recurrent convention of fictional setting implications of history is quite objective. The personal attitude towards what is happening in the world is rather coming from the "individuals' experience" (Rivkin and Ryan, 2004, p.15). The essence of truth affirmation could not be emanating from the individuals' impression of history. It is the "relative" vision by which individuals can construct their impressions about historical events happening around them. Being as such, the introspective response to history is the setting macro view which emphasizes that this history which encompasses the historical element of the setting (p.8). Thus, historical setting is limited and constrained to individuals' subjective perceptions. This is quite equal to the perception of time between the past and present periods in

Rushdie's *Shame*. In the novel, there is a relationship between the past's events and present events i.e. the immigrants and their interaction with different cultures, such as "Urdu" and "Punjabi" (p.87).

Omar's experience is important to conceive the historical insights in the novel. He is a participant in his society. But he is almost detached from his society because he commits some unacceptable things, like killing women. In this respect, history revolves around his story more than other characters because his is the link between the present and the past. By the same token, in historical authoritative setting view of reality, the subjective vision ranges from the literary texts and reality outside those texts. In this way, "historical thinkers have given up a united quest for any one universal, supracultural, timeless truth. They focus instead on what is held to be true within a specific community" (Rogers et al., 2001, pp.7-8). In that case, the social impetus is the representative drive of the conception of truth. Additionally, society shapes the individuals impressions and thoughts via interactive interlocutions among each other. This is referred to as imitation of history in fragmented textuality (p.20). Imitated history holds the fact that persons get judgmental recognition of the happenings around. They can interpret or form subjective viewpoints from the surrounding "community" by virtue of their conscious appreciation of history and life. They duplicate a perpetual and an authorial vision of history (p.21). In *Shame*, Rushdie depicts the setting extensively at the beginning of the novel. He does not explicate the characters' positions or social backgrounds. He is more interested in the fictional existence of his characters. He wants to give them a sound voice to get rid of their inferior positions. This is similar to Omar's story: "My story's palimpsest-country has, I repeat, no name of its own. The exiled Czech writer Kundera once wrote: 'A name means continuity with the past and people without a past are people without a name.' But I am dealing with a past that refuses to be suppressed, that is daily doing battle with the present; so it is perhaps unduly harsh of me to deny my fairyland a title" (p.88). Here, Rushdie contrasts his story with other stories which were written in the distant past:

Now then. Omar Khayyam Shakil is almost twelve. He is overweight, and his generative organ, newly potent, also possesses a fold of skin that should have been removed. His mothers are growing vague about the reasons for their life; while he, in contrast, has overnight become capable of levels of aggression previously foreign to his complaisant fat-boy nature. I offer (have already hinted at) three causes: one, his sighting of fourteen-year old Farah on the moon of his telescopic lens; two, his awkwardness about his altered speech, which swings out of control between croaks and squeaks while an ugly lump bobs in his throat like a cork; and one must not forget three, namely the time honoured (or dishonoured) mutations wrought by pubertal biochemistry upon the adolescent male personality... ignorant of this conjunction of diabolic forces within their son, the three mothers make the mistake of asking Omar Khayyam what he wants for his birthday. (p.29)

This historical unwillingness to a "collective" adherence to reality is echoed by setting critics. The amalgamation of

different generic techniques in literary texts, for example, "is historical feature" (Punday, 2003, p.77). In particular, the "generic mixtures" of literary texts serves as symbolic means to carry out the subjective "involvement with truth" perception (p.77). The archetypal connotation of reality is associated with "artistic" and humanistic components of literary and cultural elements of society. The meaning remains somehow subjective "although generic 'mixtures' are typical especially for the contemporary historical scenes in fiction, in fact it has never been simple to strictly define features typical for individual genres, for great literary works have ever been twisted and non-compliant with to the historical scenes in the fictional texts" (p.78)

This notion, in *Shame*, addresses in the expressions of the past in Omar Khayyam's life: "The brother whom he, Omar Khayyam, had never known. Mothers use their children as sticks each brother a rod with which to chastise the other. Asphyxiated by the hot wind of his mothers' worship of Omar Khayyam, Babar fled into the mountains; now the mothers had changed sides, and the dead boy was their weapon against the living" (p.297). Here, Omar has many time spans. The time setting in the novel allows him to be equal to his brother. This is because they live in the same historical time periods. They have the same origins and live together. Later on, Omar becomes hegemonic over his wife. He also harasses many women. This change in his character makes him strange. He departed from his previous identity into a new one:

Although some five years separated Chhuni from Bunny, it was at this time that the sisters, by virtue of dressing identically and through the incomprehensible effects of their unusual, chosen life, began to resemble each other so closely that even the servants made mistakes. I have described them as beauties; but they were not the moon-faced almond-eyed types so beloved of poets in that neck of the woods, but rather strong-chinned, powerfully built, purposefully striding women of an almost oppressively charismatic force. Now the three of them began, simultaneously, to thicken at the waist and in the breast; when one was sick in the morning, the other two began to puke in such perfectly synchronized sympathy that it was impossible to tell which stomach had heaved first. Identically, their wombs ballooned towards the pregnancy's full Escapes from the Mother Country. (p.13)

Setting critics take this issue both critically and a common focus on the position of man in the society. The notion of subjective perception of truth is denotative of the cultural significance to "all-achieving human advancement" (Punday, 2003, p.1). As such, setting encircles human phenomena of all "historical episodes or development" (p.1). The most astounding appearance of setting interest in these phenomena comes into prominence after mid-twentieth century. Before that, the setting temporality was there, but it did not "appear independently" (p.5). Nevertheless, it grows 'increasingly' to take its contemporary conjecture to indicate "a contemporary intellectual movement, or rather, a not very happy family of intellectual movements. But as it often happens, dysfunctional families are the most interesting ones" (p.1). For instance, the narrator's historical descent regarding his

family is conspicuous through *Shame's* narrative context: "In a large family house in the old quarter of the coastal city which, having no option, I must call Karachi. Raza Hyder, an orphan like his wife, has brought her (immediately after descending from the Dakota of their flight into the west) into the bosom of his maternal relations; Bariamma is his grandmother on his late mother's side" (p.72).

The family is the transitional period of time in Omar's life. He becomes a totally new person. He does not change as people around him. Instead, he becomes different from his previous life. Rushdie gives him this position. That is because Rushdie cannot participate in the fictional events. He allows himself a little space in the story. He does not directly intervene in the plot. He rather expresses his vision in terms of Omar's life. History here is relative for both of them. For Omar, history varies between his innocent life in the family and his life in his house. But Rushdie's history is something different. He is not affected by the fictional events which he recounts. He just gives voices to the suppressed people, like Omar, in the novel. This comes out of Omar's "later life" expressed by Rushdie:

The three girls had been kept inside that labyrinthine mansion until his dying day; virtually uneducated, they were imprisoned in the zenana wing where they amused each other by inventing private languages and fantasizing about what a man might look like when undressed, imagining, during their pre-pubertal years, bizarre genitalia such as holes in the chest into which their own nipples might snugly fit, 'because for all we knew in those days,' they would remind each other amazedly in later life, 'fertilization might have been supposed to happen through the breast. (p.6)

CARYL PHILLIPS'S FOREIGNERS: THREE ENGLISH LIVES

Foreigners: Three English Lives is a novel that exemplifies Phillips's perspective of the historical periods of black people. The setting works "in which a variety of conflicting ideological positions are given a voice and set in play both between and within individual speaking subjects, without being placed and judged by an authoritative authorial voice" (Parker, 2007, p.86). The setting work is also used compatibly with time periods.

Patrick O'Neill (1994) argues that the historical setting is the "most important, most penetrating, and most subtle means of manipulation available to the narrative text, whether literary or otherwise" (p.116). Here, O'Neill focuses on the "manipulative" aspects of the historical setting. Such manipulation occurs on the extrinsic level where the author compresses his writing ideology and introducing it by his narrator's intrinsic narrative level. In this manner, the author and his fictional narrator play reciprocal roles in the course of the fictional plot which is constructed throughout the narrative "perceptibility" (p.109). This is clear in the treatment of negro in *Foreigners*. This negro is treated by people of different time periods, such as Francis Barber and the doctor: "there were others whose opinions of the negro were not so generous. Some intimates of the doctor's circle freely expressed their conviction that Francis Barber was, to their

minds, a wastrel, a man who considered his master's needs only as an afterthought, and who was wont to freely spend the doctor's money in order that he might improve his own situation" (p.6). The Negro is the suppressed voice. And Phillips rewrites their history to give them a voice.

Another component of the historical setting is the narrator's "verbal" potential which conveys the story's events. The narrator's verbal recounts, however, could be the author's literary vision. Kevin O'Donnell (2003) discusses this narrative point where the plot is oriented in the textual events via appropriating some "prism," "perspective," "angle of vision," uttered by the narrator which might not be his own voice (p.71). This vision is expressed in the novel where Francis intends to study contemporary English and the negro intends to learn ancient Latin and Greek: "when the young Francis returned to London, Johnson was gratified that his servant could read and write English with improved ease, although not with great fluency, and in addition the negro had indeed been able to add Latin and Greek to his learning" (p.31).

In addition, O'Donnell (2003) proposes a determining correlation between setting temporality in historical periods (p.36). Neal Norrick (2010), furthermore, discusses the concept of the temporal novel by stating that "the temporal novel is dialogic" (p.242). Apparently, Norrick (2010) contends that history and setting temporality are the same; "the phenomenon that history calls temporality is simply another name for dialogism" (p.242). O'Donnell, moreover, supports this argument about the concomitant synonymy between dialogism and temporality; "temporality is virtually synonymous with 'dialogic'" (p.86). The accumulation of time temporality is persistent in the novel. The brother Turpin and Jackie moved to different places from time to time: "a year earlier, in the summer of 1950, Turpin, together with his brother Jackie, moved temporarily from Leamington Spa to set up training camp in Wales" (p.70). In this sense, the Negroes and black people are suppressed. Their lives in the community to which they migrate are harsh. Phillips reinforces their conditions by conferring upon them the right to be equal to other people.

COLUM MCCANN'S TRANSATLANTIC

The novel recounts different historical episodes. The plot takes place in 1919. The events' actions are set in Newfoundland. Jack Alcock and Arthur Brown are the main protagonists. They undergo and suffer from the negative sequences of World War II. The novel focuses on their social as well as their academic lives. They lack a peaceful life, and consequently, they roam many places for the sake of social tranquility.

Loes Nas (2007) claims that the social forces are the determining drives of setting "opposition" to the cultural perspective of literature; "historical setting literature acknowledges that all perception, recognition, action, and perception are shaped, if not determined, by the social domain. There can be no simple opposition to culture, no transcendent perspective or language, no secure singular objectivity, for all find their meaning only within a social framework" (p.58). In *TransAtlantic*, the historical dimension is exemplified in

Teddy Brown's imprisonment: "Teddy Brown, too, had become a prisoner of war, forced to land in France while out on photographic reconnaissance. A bullet shattered his leg. Another ruptured the fuel tank on the way down he threw out his camera, tore up his charts, scattered the pieces" (p.5). Brown's plight in imprisonment is the main cause of his suppressed or silenced voice.

Marina Mackay (2011) appropriates the historical setting as historical literary conventions in terms of the literary portrayal of real events inflected upon the ways by which the historical setting challenges these traditions (p.2). This critique is the literary factor in which "setting distinctive character lies in this kind of wholesale 'nudging' commitment to doubleness, or duplicity. In many ways, it is an even-handed process because history ultimately manages to install and reinforce as much as undermine and subvert the conventions and presuppositions it appears to challenge" (pp.1-2). The historical setting characteristic also appears in the story of Lily in *TransAtlantic*: "Lily had left St Louis in the same week as her son. To be near his regiment. He was seventeen years old. A head of chestnut-coloured hair. A shy boy once, he had left, swollen with the prospect of war" (p.153). Lily, like Brown, has difficult positions. They incarnate the silenced voices in the novel.

It is the historical setting mode which constructs historical critique of time "presuppositions" (Mackay, 2011, p.28). Therefore, setting interrogates the referential manners of fictional narrative to equate "the documentary impulse of realism meets problematizing of reference seen earlier in historical setting. Historical narrative is filtered through the history of both. And this is where the question of representation and its ideas enters" (p.28). In the long run, historical setting is judged as the author's ideological "time representation [which] is self-consciously all of these – image, narrative, product of ideology" (p.29). Such time category is elucidated in Emily's life: "Emily rose from the chair and moved across the lawn. Her walking cane sunk into the soft ground. She found herself attended to by a number of Belfast widowers. They leaned in close. She was surprised by their flirtation. They were eager to meet an America, they said" (p.218). Emily's life is also harsh. She is silenced. McCann grants her a voice in the novel through the historical time in which she lives.

CONCLUSION

The main discussion of this essay is the historical setting in Salman Rushdie's *Shame*, Caryl Phillips's *Foreigners: Three English Lives*, and Colum McCann's *TransAtlantic*. The discussion has followed the role of history in these novels. The role of history is to give the silenced minorities or voices a strong presence in their societies. The main characters in these novels suffer from different plights. They do not behave like the normal people in the course of the events. They are neglected by other characters. My analysis focused on their weak positions and how they could develop mist a seemingly retarded society. The analysis has mainly focused on the low position of these characters. But these positions are fortified by the authors who give them string voices through historical periods.

Shame, on the one hand, has been analyzed by concentrating on the position of Omar who appears weak and a little child at the beginning of the novel. Then, he grows up in his family. His sisters teach him not to be shame. This kind of teaching instilled in him new changes. His personality becomes different from his previous one when he sued to be a peaceful child with his sisters. Rushdie gives him a new picture in the novel through historical periods.

Accordingly, the temporal setting is the possible means used by Rushdie to rewrite history in order to give Omar a powerful voice. On the other hand, the analysis of *Foreigners* also concentrated on the position of the black people. Phillips rewrites their historical periods to give them a voice which indicates that they are not silenced. These characters gradually grow independent and become more autonomous. Similarly, in *TransAtlantic*, such characters as Brown, Lily, and Emily are suppressed. They do not have the opportunity to speak or express their desires. They appear weak and unable to get by their lives. The only way they look good and depended is through author's (McCann) appropriation into their society. They are neglected by the people of their society. They begin to look for some sort of peace and rest of their daily life's demands. McCann bestow upon them good positions by rewriting some historical periods.

END NOTE

1. Please refer to Free Book Notes; <http://www.freebooknotes.com/summaries-analysis/shame-rushdie/>

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