

Salman Rushdie's *Shalimar the Clown*:  
A Critical Study

Probably no one is better than [Salman Rushdie](#) at depicting the interconnected human variety of the world at the end of the second millennium. As he says in *Shalimar the Clown*, his ninth novel, "Everywhere was now a part of everywhere else," and "Everyone's story was a part of everyone else's." The rich fabric of human interconnection is Rushdie's grand theme, a kind of literary U.N. he shares with numerous other writers, especially other Anglo-Indian authors. East meets West. North meets South. Transients, migrants, and

immigrants converge and merge in a simmering stew of in-between, of dislocation and suspension, an intercultural limbo whose mecca in *Shalimar the Clown* is Los Angeles.

Such human interconnection takes a particularly violent turn in *Shalimar the Clown*, which shows not only American power to do damage abroad and arouse animosity but also the ability of avengers to strike across decades and thousands of miles. Possibly Rushdie had in mind the fatwa against his life, provoked by his 1988 novel *The Satanic Verses* when

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his 1988 novel [\*The Satanic Verses\*](#), when he contemplated *Shalimar the Clown*.

The fatwa, however, was only one early shot in the war against Western ways launched by Islamic fundamentalists which included the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, and others.

*Shalimar the Clown* thus has immediacy and relevance, as the rise of extremist terrorism is one of the topics Rushdie covers in his many-faceted novel. This work also concerns other matters, particularly the ongoing destruction of disputed Kashmir, to which Rushdie has

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family ties; the novel is dedicated to his late Kashmiri grandparents. The centerpiece of *Shalimar the Clown* is a case of personal revenge, not programmatic terrorism, though Rushdie's point might be that terrorism has a personal face.

The pieces of *Shalimar the Clown* do not always fit together clearly, and its main characters are also creaky. Even Rushdie's vaunted style, with its Shakespearian playfulness and extravagance, fails at times, such as

when he makes some embarrassing efforts at rendering broken English and [dialect](#). Mostly, however, his imaginative, engaging style carries the novel along and makes the pieces sound good, whether they make perfect sense or not.

The main action of *Shalimar the Clown* involves a love triangle and an extended pursuit of personal revenge by one of its aggrieved parties. Max Ophuls, married U.S. ambassador to India, falls in love with Boonyi Kaul Noman, a beautiful Kashmiri dancer who also is married.

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With the help of a sleazy embassy aide, Max entices Boonyi to New Delhi. There she hopes to advance her career, but Max makes her his mistress, enjoys her for a while, and then leaves her pregnant. Max's wife, Peggy, outraged by his habitual womanizing, leaves him but adopts Boonyi's baby, Kashmira, whom Peggy renames India. Boonyi returns in disgrace to her Kashmiri village, Pachigam, where she is declared *mritak* (one of the living dead), shunned, and spends the rest of her life alone in an abandoned mountain hut. Meanwhile,

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Boonyi's husband, Noman Sher Noman, also known as Shalimar the Clown, vows deadly revenge against Max, Boonyi, and the baby. Taking a circuitous route through several terrorist organizations, he spends years training, killing professionally, and whetting his knife for the upcoming big events.

Stripped down, the plot sounds like a [melodrama](#), possibly a Kashmiri version of the "Madame Butterfly" story, first penned in 1898 by John Luther Long. Rushdie enriches his novel with an epic



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