Shalimar the Clown Summary

Setting

The novel is based partly in a small town in the region of Kashmir. The town itself is imaginary, but it is located in an accurate geographic location not far from Srinagar.

The title refers to a character in the story, a Kashmiri villager named Shalimar, who performs a tightrope act for the amusement of the other villagers.

Plot Summary

The central character, India, is the illegitimate child of a former United States ambassador to India, Maximilian Ophuls. Although a number of narratives and incidents in the novel revolve around Kashmir, the novel opens in Los Angeles. Max Ophuls, a US diplomat who has worked in the Kashmir Valley, is murdered by his former chauffeur, Shalimar.

Several flashbacks take the readers to the past, and one learns that Shalimar was once full of affection, love and laughter. He lived in the fictional Kashmiri village of Pachigam. His skill on the tight rope has earned him renown in his village and the nickname Shalimar the clown. At a young age, he falls in love with a beautiful Kashmiri Pandit girl, named Boonyi. The village elders agree to the marriage and all seems fine, except that Boonyi doesn't want to remain stuck in this small village. Things come to a head when Maximilian comes to the village, sees Boonyi dance, and becomes enamored of her. With the help of his assistant, he gets her a flat in Delhi, and an affair blossoms. A scandal erupts when Boonyi gets pregnant and Max is forced to return. The child, India, is brought to England by Maximilian's wife.

Shalimar was deeply in love with Boonyi and couldn't bear her betrayal. He devotes the rest of his life to taking revenge on the people that were the cause of his unhappiness. For this purpose he joins up with various Jihadi organisations and becomes a renowned assassin.

Maximilian, the son of Ashkenazi Jews, was raised in France. Following the death of his parents in a Nazi concentration camp, he becomes a hero of the French resistance. A fictionalised account of the Bugatti automobile company plays a role in his escape from the Nazis.[7] Following the war, he marries a British aristocrat, and eventually becomes American ambassador to India. This appointment

eventually leads to his unspecified role in relation to American counter-terrorism. The appointment is more important than his ambassadorship, but his exact role is left vague.

Shalimar receives training from insurgent groups in Afghanistan and the Philippines, and leaves for the USA. He murders Max on the day he resigns as his driver. Shalimar evades the authorities and eventually returns to India's home, with the intention of killing her.

The story portrays the paradise that once was Kashmir, and how the politics of the sub-continent ripped apart the lives of those caught in the middle of the battleground.

Shalimar the Clown is, ultimately, a very old-fashioned revenge saga. The book begins near the end: the first section quickly gets the central act of retribution over with, with most of the rest of the book then describing what led up to it.

Rushdie concentrates his story on four characters, each at the fore of one of the book's five sections (with one a central figure twice). A story of love, passion, honour, betrayal, much is intimate and personal -- but Rushdie frames this story within geopolitical and contemporary contexts, attempting to tie it in with something much larger (though part of what he is trying to do is to show that history is always also very personal). Max Ophuls, for example, is a statesman, the diplomat who replaced John Kenneth Galbraith as ambassador to India in the 1960s; he was also a hero of the French Resistance. Shalimar the Clown, born Noman Sher Noman (a doubled no-man), the wronged man who exacts his revenge, is long active in an international Islamic terrorist network. Even Max's daughter is burdened with more than just a name, one which is also a place-name, India.

Rushdie doesn't focus on the most prominent festering insurgencies of our time -- Palestine, Afghanistan, now Iraq -- but rather on Kashmir, an area of tension since the India-Pakistan partition, and one in which violence escalated dramatically in the past two decades. The books best scenes are set in these parts, and describe the destruction of this idyll. It is, if not entirely a paradise on earth, at least a place where people do get along, coexisting relatively happily (and humbly).

Shalimar and the girl called Boonyi, whom he falls in love with, are from Pachigam, a small but renowned town of entertainers and caterers. They are of different religions, but the biggest problem that poses is how their wedding ceremony should be performed: the villagers are understanding, flexible, and there is solidarity against outsiders -- be they the nearby competing village of Shirmal or more sinister forces from farther afield, the Indian army or the insurgents.

Shalimar and Boonyi's love looks to be a fairy-tale story, but it sours quickly: Boonyi realises -- a bit too late -- that marrying Shalimar condemns them: "to a lifetime jail sentence". She has grander ambitions than the small town she'll be stuck in for the rest of her life allows for. So from that moment on she's on the lookout for a chance to escape.

Opportunity finally comes in the form of Max Ophuls, newly appointed American ambassador to India, who comes to visit Kashmir and is immediately taken by the beautiful dancer. Ophuls was born in Strasbourg, in the Alsace, another area that, like Kashmir, has been fought over and to which different countries lay claim (Germany and France, in this case). Before the war his Jewish family was in the printing business, giving him hands-on knowledge of how to forge papers that eventually proves useful in the Resistance. (Rushdie occasionally gets carried away, having Ophuls first learn "about blowing things up" and actually carrying out a bombing himself; the Resistance would never have risked a man with his precious talent (forgery) on such a task.) He is a wartime hero, his exploits the stuff of legend -- and he also marries another Resistance legend, Peggy Rhodes (known as the Rat -- or, affectionately, Ratty), who unfortunately proves not to care too much about sex (while Max certainly does).

Rushdie does the international-conflict scenes of World War II quite well as well, but Ophuls' (and the Rat's actions) are basically simply described, without any regard for the moral implications. (Having him toss a bomb - one of Rushdie's missteps -- is one of the few occasions morality comes up, allowing him to claim: "he personally could not get over the moral hurdles required to perform such acts on a regular basis" -- an odd take on morality that isn't explored any further. And again Rushdie does not follow through: the fact that debonair Ophuls has no problem facilitating considerable carnage (as he does throughout his career, even if for arguably the right reasons) as long as he doesn't literally get his hands dirty needs to be addressed but isn't.) Ophuls is clearly in the right -- the Nazis are an evil that must be brought down at all cost -- but Rushdie makes no effort to consider how the other conflicts addressed in the book -- all morally more ambiguous -- are to be considered. The beliefs -- often sincere, even if misguided -- that lead the terrorists and other actors to do the horrendous things they do perhaps deserve no respect, but they are barely even considered in Rushdie's equation. The militants, mullahs, and officers are all obviously second-rate figures (while Ophuls' only real flaw is his womanising), not worthy of being taken seriously. Rushdie doesn't worry nearly as much about the human toll in World War II: outrages serve as a trigger, but the consequences are glossed over, Rushdie going so far as to basically airlift Ophuls out of Europe before the war is even over, so that the devastation left behind can simply be left behind. Not so in Kashmir, revisited again and again.

Many of the militant figures in India are ridiculous, and many are active on one side or another (or at least go to the lengths they do) for what are obviously largely personal reasons: for example, the Indian Colonel (later General) Kachhwaha, responsible for the military actions in the region, was rejected by Boonyi (and the locals), and his crack-down seems motivated almost solely by these experiences. An Islamic radical is literally a tin-pot mullah -- though he is one of Rushdie's more inspired inventions in this novel, iron mullah Maulana Bulbul Fakh. And the biggest fraud of all is, of course, Shalimar the clown, who joins the fundamentalist terrorists not because he believes in their cause but for the sole goal of eventually having an opportunity to get at Ophuls.

Shalimar is also wiling to do some terrible things, and gets involved in conflicts that have nothing to do with him, blinded by his one obsession. For a novel in which terrorism and militancy are so central, Rushdie does not explore the motivation behind it very seriously (not does he bother much with the personal consequence -- Shalimar is merely a revenge-machine; what he thinks about at night after he's committed some atrocity isn't bothered with).

The novel moves along in fits and spurts, but Rushdie tells the local tales -- Ophuls' war exploits, events in Kashmir -- well and it remains fairly compelling throughout. The scenes in Pachigam and Kashmir, and the collapse of the town, are the strongest in the novel, Rushdie evoking place and slowly unfolding catastrophe well (with only a bit too much reliance on the supernatural). Ophuls' story, more broken up (only life in France and his time in India are really described; much of what he did after, though relevant, barely mentioned), is interesting enough, but not always comfortably fit into the narrative. Daughter India, yet another character who vows revenge, living in Los Angeles, also isn't ideally tied in.

Ophuls' assassination isn't the final act: the novel goes more than full circle, continuing beyond it (as the vow Shalimar made extends beyond just the man who took his wife away from him), the ending a slightly disappointing showdown. It's not unexpected, but Rushdie has his characters jump through very unlikely hoops to set it up, making it seem slightly ridiculous, a final letdown.

Bit by bit Shalimar the Clown is fairly successful. Local scenes and episodes are very well-done, and Rushdie offers some solid flights of fancy. The characters are also fairly compelling, from smaller local figures to Ophuls, Boonyi, and Ratty. (A major exception is Shalimar, who remains more of a shell than person, Rushdie unwilling to really consider his feelings and thoughts). Interestingly, few of the major characters are sympathetic, aside from the charming womaniser Ophuls. The women (though admirably very independent-minded), in particular, fare quite badly: both Boonyi and Ratty are bitches who do things that inflict great hurt (Ophuls does too, but almost always with great charm), though each is sympathetic at times. Ophuls is to blame for their worst troubles, but they got themselves into

these messes. (The two central marriages in the novel -- Shalimar and Boonyi, and Ophuls and Ratty -- are both catastrophic; it's no surprise that Rushdie makes India wary of any relationship and, even when she falls in love, is happy to keep her man at a distance much of the time.)

(The temptation to read autobiography into aspects of this is hard to resist: the public image of Rushdie's personal life is certainly very Ophuls-like (fatwa -- of a different sort -- and all), and his previous experiences with marriage (and the women involved) would seem to inform the marriages (and women) he describes here.)

The bigger picture of Shalimar the Clown is less convincing. The basic story is relatively simple (love, betrayal, revenge), and the connexion to contemporary geopolitics uneasily grafted onto it. The severely underdeveloped character of Shalimar the clown is perhaps the major problem, but the refusal to consider why people kill each other in any depth also hurts the novel. Rushdie is consumed by the idea of killing for honour and revenge (the central reason for most of the many killings in the book), and even if all the conflicts he addresses could be reduced to that, he doesn't delve deeply enough into the passion honour and revenge can arouse in people.

At times the book is poignant and convincing, the scenes in Kashmir seeming heartfelt and written with deep conviction. Moving elsewhere -- Los Angeles, in particular -- Rushdie seems far less sure of himself and what he wants to do (or rather: how to go about it). More significantly, Rushdie seems unsure of what kind of book he wanted to write: that simple tale of love, betrayal, and revenge, or a book that considers local armed conflict in the contemporary world. In imitation-epic style he picked both, but he should have chosen one or the other; the mix makes for a decent novel, but not an exceptional one (and some of the parts -- and some of Rushdie's previous work -- suggest he has the exceptional in him).

Salman Rushdie’s 2005 novel *Shalimar the Clown* picks up some of the same themes that he has been working with throughout his critically acclaimed career. The novel explores the fall of Kashmir from a haven of tolerance and peace to a hotbed of extremism and fundamentalist violence through the smaller story of two people who grow up there, fall in love, and then are torn apart by circumstances

that result in murder, bloodshed, and tragedy. Using the hyperverbal style for which he has become known, the magical realism load which enabled him to make mythical and historical connections that would otherwise remain hidden, Rushdie traces the roots of violence and the way its expression twists and ruins our world. The book is divided into five parts, which are told through the eyes of the five main characters that we encounter.

The first section, set in present-day Los Angeles, revolves around the life of India Ophuls, a beautiful documentary maker and the daughter of Max Ophuls, a former American ambassador to India and later the US counterterrorism chief. India's glamorous and sophisticated life consists of her work, of maintaining her appearance, and of trying to decide between a variety of imperfect suitors. Suddenly, this life is turned upside down when her father is assassinated by his former chauffeur, a Kashmiri man who calls himself Shalimar the Clown.

The second part of the novel takes us back in time to 1960s Kashmir, to a fictional village named Pachigam. Drawing on his own childhood memories, Rushdie presents this town as an idyllic retreat from the creeping chaos that followed the partition of India and the creation of Pakistan in 1947. In the middle of a glorious natural paradise, the town is a peaceful mix of Hindus and Muslims, a way of life the novel explores through the village's ancient myths and legends. The community is so close-knit that when a Hindu girl named Boonyi Kaul and a Muslim boy — Shalimar, still a sweet romantic at this point — fall in love, the village elders unanimously agree that they should marry.

Everything seems fine for Shalimar and Boonyi for a while, but the seeds of trouble are there from the very beginning. For one thing, it's probably not a great idea for two fourteen-year-olds to make such a commitment. The night of their wedding, Shalimar playfully tells his new wife that if she ever leaves him, he will track her down and kill her and any children she may have that are not his. Boonyi brushes this off, though she soon realizes that she wants more than a village life with a man who performs a tightrope act (this is why Shalimar is called the Clown). She gets her opportunity when Max, now the ambassador, travels through

Kashmir and stops at the village where he sees Boonyi dancing. The two embark on an affair, and Max gets Boonyi an apartment in Delhi, where she lives until she has his child, a girl she names Kashmira. The illegitimate birth causes a scandal, and Max is recalled to the U.S. His cold and proper wife renames the baby India and takes her with them.

In the novel's third section, we learn about Max. Born in the French city of Strasbourg to a Jewish family, Max ends up joining the French resistance during WWII after his parents are killed in a concentration camp. He is brave and develops a skill set as a spy that will eventually make him an excellent diplomat. After the war, he marries an aristocratic British woman, and together they move to the United States, where Max quickly rises through the ranks until he is appointed as an ambassador.

The next section brings us back to Pachigam, but now we are in the angry, brutal mind of Shalimar. Ever since Boonyi left him, his rage and resentment have built up to such a degree that whatever love, kindness, and fellow feeling he has ever had has been replaced with the murderous intent to kill everyone who has stood in the way of his happiness. Boonyi, forced to return to the village after losing her child, has been officially declared dead for breaking the marriage vow. It is clear that Shalimar will kill her, but is waiting because he has promised her father and his own to only do it after they are both dead.

Obsessed with raining down blood vengeance on those whom he thinks have wronged him, Shalimar goes for training to various jihadist and extremist groups; militant fundamentalists were more than happy to teach him how to kill. Assassination is now the only way he can feel pleasure — on his first assignment, he sets up to use a knife rather than a gun because he wants to feel first-hand what it is like to take someone else's life. It turns out that Shalimar is an excellent assassin, helped along by his tightrope skills, and by the fact that he is only a hollow shell of a real human being. This section of the novel is particularly difficult, as Rushdie meticulously details the real-life atrocities committed in Kashmir by fundamentalist groups.

In the book’s last section, Shalimar has continued his training with insurgents in Afghanistan and then the Philippines. He now finally considers himself ready to go to the U.S. to install himself as Max’s driver as part of a long-range plan for revenge. After killing Max Shalimar, he escapes the authorities. The novel ends on an unresolved cliffhanger, with Shalimar making his way to India’s home, intent on fulfilling his promise to Boonyi that he would kill any children she had by another man.

Shalimar the Clown was longlisted for the Man Booker prize and has been praised by critics; John Updike called Rushdie “a bard of the grim one world we all, in a state of some dread, inhabit” in *The New Yorker*.

Salman Rushdie's literary landscapes are often shattered utopias -- idyllic worlds destroyed by the outside -- and real -- world's intrusion. Often, these lands' downfalls are the result of fervent nationalism, religious fanaticism, and imperialism. In Rushdie's latest novel, *Shalimar the Clown*, the utopian land is Kashmir, and its destruction is a result of all of these forces. Its inhabitants too -- for Rushdie's lands are metaphors for his characters -- are raped by Indian soldiers, abused by Muslim extremists, and taken advantage of by American ambassadors. They are tragic figures whose misfortunes take them to extreme -- and often ignoble -- measures. An ambitious revenge tale that spans three generations and three continents, *Shalimar the Clown* doesn't always juggle its soap-opera drama and brutal realism with aplomb, but at a time when much contemporary literature is content with self-deprecating irony and obsession (masked as contempt) with pop culture, Rushdie's commitment to difficult, serious topics is most welcome.

The novel begins with a crime -- the murder of ex-U.S. ambassador Max Ophuls by his Kashmiri butler -- and the meaty middle section, which comprises about 300 of the novel's 400 pages, is an elongated flashback, explaining a complicated love triangle -- the genesis of the crime. As *Midnight's Children*'s narrator Saleem Sinai asserts that he must his story by telling the stories of his parents and grandparents, Rushdie cannot explain the killer's, who calls himself Shalimar the Clown, motivation without talking about the history of the town from which he hails, without detailing the histories of Shalimar's parents and wife and her parents, without retracing Max's roots to Germany and France and his involvement as a resistance fighter during World War II.

Amid all the globe-trotting and history lessons and family trees is a love triangle: one involving Shalimar the Clown, son of a Muslim theater troupe leader, and his wife Boonyi Kaul, daughter of a Hindu pandit. The two lovers are part of a secular Kashmiri society of performers and cooks. The two religions coexist peacefully in this town and borrow from one another; the Muslims adapt the Hindu's gods and superstitions, while the Hindus learn to include meat in their daily cooking. Born on the same day to two best friends, Shalimar the Clown and Boonyi Kaul are inexorably bound -- destined to become best friends and lovers. So when the two fourteen year olds are found making love in the wilderness, the liberal townsfolk don't ostracize the precocious youth, but encourage the two to marry. This marriage serves as a symbol of Kashmir's religious tolerance and a taunt to the Indian military guards keeping watch over the town, who disapprove of the inter-religious marriage and want Kashmir a strictly Hindu state.

But beauty, fortune, talent; these gifts often complicate Rushdie's characters as much as they help them, and Boonyi's beauty and her pride -- like Kashmir's -- give her a desirability that ends up a curse. When Boonyi dances in the troupe's performance for guest-of-honor Max Ophuls, the American ambassador to India, he is overcome with desire. The subsequent events unfold as in a soap opera: Boonyi wants to escape her provincial town, Ophuls initiates an affair but then is overcome by guilt (he has a wife), the cuckolded husband seeks revenge.

This all sounds fairly pedestrian, but in Rushdie's hands the story becomes much more complex. The melodrama of the love triangle parallels -- and directly influences(?) -- the melodrama unfolding in Kashmir. Instead of Kashmir fighting for its independence from India, now it has both India and Pakistan -- with its ascetic Islamic leader in the novel called the Iron Mullah -- to contend with. No longer able to fend for themselves, the Kashmiri people divide into those for unification with India and those for Pakistan. The political situation is further obscured with the States', who are supplying arms to the Pakistani troops, dubious involvement.

Though Rushdie is rigid in his opinions (the writer's criticism of Islam in *The Satanic Versus* infamously led to the fatwa against him), he is not judgmental when it comes to his characters. His characters aren't bad so much as the products of turmoil and misfortune. A cuckolded clown becomes a terrorist because of an uncontainable hurt and frustration with the Kashmiri resistance; a World War II hero becomes a seducer because he can't stand the desperate look of desire in a woman's eyes; a wife becomes a mistress because she wants a better life for herself and for her children.

Rushdie's operatic lyricism accompanies the action brilliantly here, and the power of his language, whether describing the moonlit terrain or the rape of a townswoman, is unparalleled. He's always been long-winded, but the style compliments, rather than burdens, his intricate narratives. His poetry also is in keeping with the streak of magical realism that typically runs through his novels -- he incorporates Hindu mythology, snake curses, and ominous prophesies as seamlessly as he incorporates timely pop culture references.

The novel loses some of its mystique when transported from these magical foreign lands back to the United States, and, as a result, its ending is a bit of a let down after the captivating midsection. That aside, though, *Shalimar the Clown* delivers what fans have come to expect from a Rushdie novel: thoughtful analyses of politics and culture, history lessons, and, of course, a great story.