

Pakistan in History and Fiction

A Companion Handout for Salman Rushdie's Shame

MA English · Semester 3 · World Fiction Paper | Dr. Krisha Das, Handique Girls' College

1. Timeline: The Real History Behind the Novel

Shame (1983) is set in a fictional country “not quite Pakistan,” but the political events it dramatizes closely track Pakistan's real history from Partition through the Zia years. The timeline below marks the key milestones; the dashed line shows where Rushdie's own act of writing falls within this history.

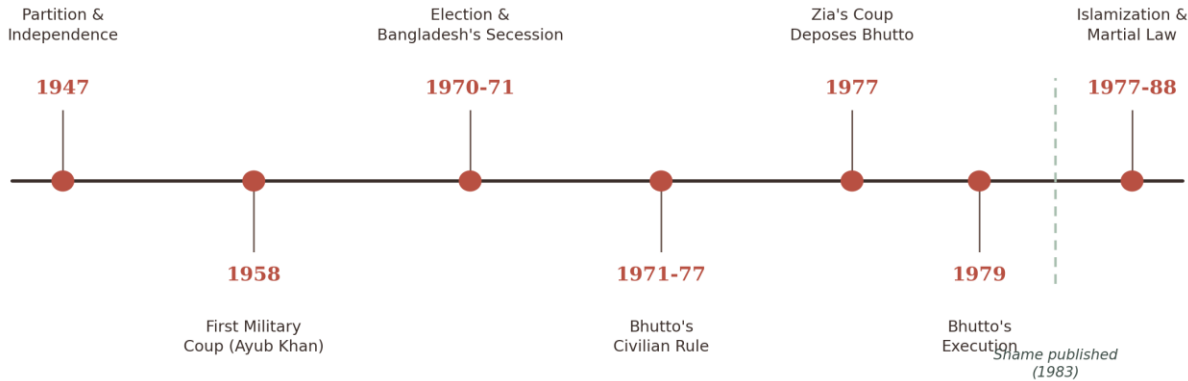


Figure 1. Key events in Pakistani history, 1947-1988, with *Shame*'s 1983 publication marked.

2. Mind Map: History and Its Fictional Counterpart

The map below groups this history into three clusters and shows how each becomes transformed — through allegory, magic realism, and displaced narration — into a specific element of *Shame*. Line style matters here: a solid line marks a direct character or plot model (Harappa, Hyder); a dashed line marks a connection the novel never states outright — Partition and 1971 are background trauma the text implies rather than dramatizes. The dotted lines show how Sufiya Zinobia, introduced separately in Part Two, comes to embody the buried shame running through all three eras at once.

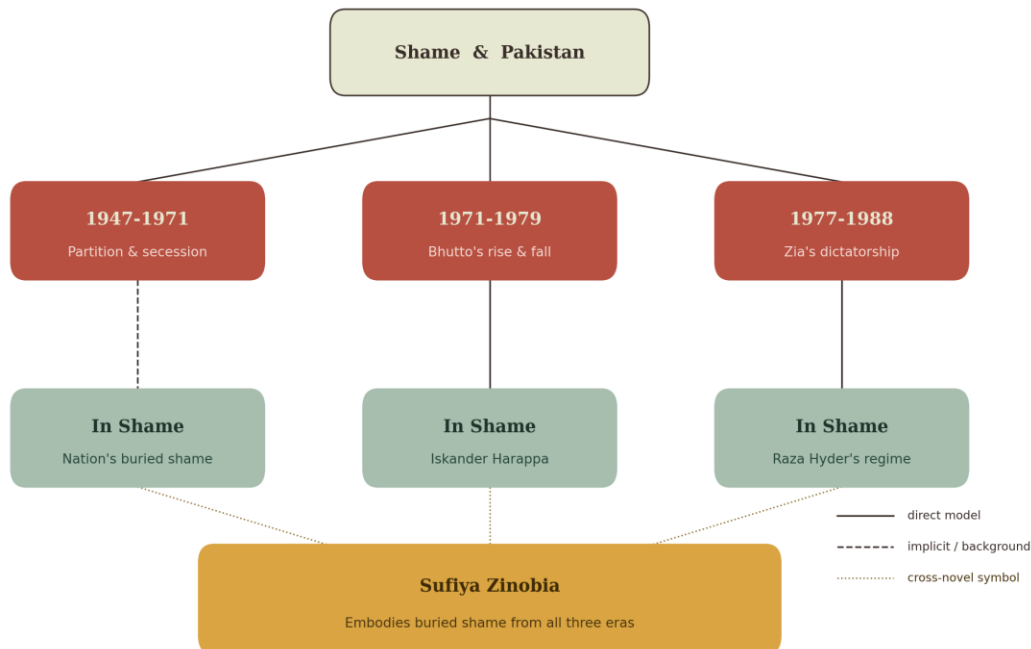


Figure 2. Historical eras (top), the novel's counterparts (middle), and Sufiya Zinobia as the figure who carries all three (bottom).

- Historical reality — documented events in Pakistan's history
- In Shame — how the novel represents or transforms that history
- Sufiya Zinobia — the character who embodies this shame in the plot

3. Notes on Each Era

1947-1971 — Founding Trauma

- **1947 — Partition and a fragile birth.** Pakistan is created as a Muslim-majority state carved out of British India, split unusually into two wings over a thousand miles apart (West Pakistan and East Pakistan, now Bangladesh), with India in between. Partition itself is catastrophic: mass displacement and communal violence kill hundreds of thousands and force millions across new borders.
- **1948-1956 — Early instability.** The new state loses its founding father almost at once: Muhammad Ali Jinnah dies in 1948. His successor as Prime Minister, Liaquat Ali Khan, is assassinated in 1951. Pakistan does not adopt its first constitution until 1956, when it formally becomes an “Islamic Republic.”
- **1958 — The first military coup.** Amid continuing instability, President Iskander Mirza is displaced by army chief General Ayub Khan, who declares himself president. This establishes military rule as a recurring feature of Pakistani politics — a precedent Zia-ul-Haq will follow two decades later.
- **1960s — The widening East-West gap.** Although East Pakistan holds the majority of the population, political power and economic investment remain concentrated in West Pakistan. Bengalis increasingly experience this as economic exploitation and cultural condescension, including resentment over Urdu being imposed as the national language over Bengali.
- **1970 — Pakistan's first free general election.** The Awami League, led by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, wins an outright majority — 167 of 169 seats allotted to East Pakistan — while Bhutto's Pakistan Peoples Party wins only 88 seats, concentrated in the West. By the arithmetic of the election, Rahman has the right to form the next government.
- **1971 — Operation Searchlight and civil war.** West Pakistan's leadership refuses to hand over power. On the night of 25-26 March 1971, the army launches a military crackdown in Dhaka, the opening act of a nine-month campaign of mass killing and mass sexual violence against the Bengali population. India intervenes in December; Pakistan surrenders on 16 December 1971, and Bangladesh's independence is secured.

In Shame: this history is never dramatized directly in the novel — it is the buried, unspoken injury beneath the invented nation, resurfacing as the novel's recurring claim that shame which goes unacknowledged does not disappear; it accumulates and erupts elsewhere.

1971-1979 — Bhutto's Rise and Fall

- **1967 — Founding the PPP.** Zulfikar Ali Bhutto leaves Ayub Khan's cabinet and founds the Pakistan Peoples Party on an explicitly populist, socialist-leaning platform, building a devoted following among peasants and workers in West Pakistan.
- **1971-1973 — Taking power.** After the 1971 war and Yahya Khan's resignation, Bhutto becomes President and, under the new 1973 constitution, Prime Minister of a parliamentary Pakistan.
- **1972-1973 — Nationalization and land reform.** Bhutto's government nationalizes major industries, banks, and insurance companies, and introduces land reforms lowering ceilings on landholding and strengthening tenants' rights — reforms that remain incompletely enforced.
- **1976 — A fatal appointment.** Bhutto appoints General Zia-ul-Haq — seen at the time as a loyal, unthreatening officer — as his army chief of staff, a decision that will shortly end his life.
- **March 1977 — Disputed elections.** The PPP wins a sweeping majority in general elections, but opposition parties allege massive rigging; protests and riots spread, and the army is called in to restore order.
- **July 1977 — Zia's coup.** General Zia deposes Bhutto in a bloodless coup, declares martial law, and repeatedly postpones the elections he promises.

- **1978-1979 — Trial and execution.** Zia reopens a 1974 murder-conspiracy case against Bhutto; the Lahore High Court sentences him to death in a trial widely criticized as politically engineered, the Supreme Court upholds it, and Bhutto is hanged on 4 April 1979 despite clemency appeals from around the world.

In Shame: this entire arc becomes Iskander Harappa — his charisma, his populism, and his destruction at the hands of the very protege who once served under him. The novel compresses a cold political calculation into an intimate betrayal between two men who were once close.

1977-1988 — Zia's Dictatorship

- **1977-1979 — Consolidating power.** Zia keeps postponing the elections he promised, eventually banning political parties and suspending voting indefinitely by late 1979, while Bhutto's execution removes his most serious rival.
- **1979 onward — Islamization.** Zia introduces the Hudood Ordinances, criminalizing offences such as theft and adultery according to religious law, alongside Federal Shariat Courts, changes to the law of evidence, and a Zakat and Ushr ordinance. Critics argue these measures function as much to legitimize Zia's rule among conservative religious constituencies as to deliver justice.
- **1979-1988 — The Afghan War and the frontline state.** Following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, Zia positions Pakistan as a frontline state in the US-backed resistance, with the ISI channeling support to the Afghan Mujahideen — reshaping Pakistan's military and intelligence establishment for decades to come.
- **1985 — A managed opening.** Non-party elections are held and martial law is formally lifted, but Zia retains the presidency and real power remains concentrated with him.
- **1988 — Zia's death.** Zia is killed in a still-unexplained plane crash in August 1988. Elections that follow bring Benazir Bhutto — daughter of the man Zia executed — to power as Pakistan's first female Prime Minister, just outside the novel's own timeframe.

In Shame: this becomes Raza Hyder's regime — the novel's clearest picture of a nation as an “agonistic community,” held together by force, rivalry, and dictatorship rather than by shared belief or consent.