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Women empowerment in the writings of Salman Rushdie

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Abstract

Salman Rushdie as an immigrant postmodernist is one of the leading novelists of the twentieth century. In his works, Salman Rushdie presents the cultural crisis which has been in the backdrop of post colonial context. He covers the developing women in his works. Salman Rushdie in his major novels presents women in both ways- subjugated as well as powerful. However, *Shame* is the exclusive novel in which the empowerment of women has been dealt by him in detail.

Salman Rushdie's *Shame* is one of those novels in which he has focused on Pakistan's history which represents its political conditions. This work has been taken as a feminist novel. The author shows his intention by declaring that he is going to write "her story" in place of "his story" that is he means to write about the empowerment of women. *Shame* is a novel in which Salman Rushdie questions patriarchal dominance which kills women's desires for selfhood which loses its identity. When Sufiya, a girl child, is born in the rich family of national leader Raza Hyder, she also is deprived of any freedom and enjoyment only because her parents had hoped to beget a male child. The author tries to establish the point that this treatment has become the greatest hindrance in the empowerment of women.

Sufiya Zinobia, being a subjugated woman, becomes passive in spite of the fact she is the central character in the novel. She indeed, has been portrayed as a peripheral character. The point Rushdie wants to bring home is that women should be empowered and should no more remain peripheral.

Thus, Salman Rushdie in his novel *Shame* raises his voice against the patriarchal as well as the matriarchal construct. In a way, the authors seem to suggest that a women's search for self identity should not end up in an epiphany of multiple selves. However, this very thing makes her realize his strength of being a beautiful woman.

Keywords: women empowerment, post modernism, cultural crisis and discrimination

Introduction

Salman Rushdie is a novelist who is considered an immigrant postmodernist. In his works, Salman Rushdie presents the cultural crisis which has been in the backdrop of postcolonial context. Primarily he deals with politics and history in his novels, however he also has enough to comment on the identity of women. He covers the developing women in his works. He goes on to write, no doubt, about the dominance of male chauvinism, but he also talks of the dominance of women in his novels.

Salman Rushdie's writings generally cover the influences of the East. If we study the major issues discussed by him in his writings we find that most of his concerns have been directed towards the culture full of conflicts, gender discrimination pertaining to the societies of the East. Besides these, we find that history of the oriental countries has been mingled with fantasy creatively. Salman Rushdie also satirises political conditions of the oriental countries. Mostly authors have focussed on these issues in his writings and jump to the conclusion that woman has been presented as a subjugated personality. All these issues, no doubt, have been dealt by the author comprehensively in his writings however, there is another aspect which has been left untouched by the critics and readers i.e. the empowerment of women in his writings. Salman Rushdie in his major novels presents women in both ways – subjugated as well as powerful. However, *Shame* is the exclusive novel in which the empowerment of women has been dealt by him in detail.

As far as Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* is concerned, the author in it also discusses the role of women in the context of the nation. However it can be said that it is very difficult to ascertain that the role women play in this novel is not very easy. In the course of the novel

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Saleem Sinai, the protagonist and the omniscient narrator, declares that “women have always been the ones to change my life” (220). This statement of Saleem gave an opportunity to critics how Rushdie presents his discussion on gender. There is no doubt in the fact that Rushdie has a feminist approach in this novel and goes on to condemn the harsh treatment meted out to women in the society as well as in political and economic fields. However there are critics who opine that Rushdie’s presentation of women is problematic. Rushdie’s presentation of women in his writings has been praised as well as condemned by critics. The central discourse that Rushdie presents in the novel *Midnight’s Children* is hybridity which is internally based on gender construction. And it appears, as some critics think, that all the negativity of this discourse has been discussed through female characters as the male characters are found to be in positive modes. There are feminist critics who declare that the writings of Salman Rushdie are misogynistic texts. Aijaz Ahmad reprimands Salman Rushdie for creating a-
Gallery of women who are either frigid and desexualized . . . or demented and moronic . . . or dulled into nullity . . . or driven to despair, suicide, and sheer surreal. (Salman Rushdie’s *Shame* 1467)

Another critic Inderpal Grewal writes about the style of the author in *Shame* and comments that “the authoritative stance of the writer...breaks down the coalition between the writer and women” (Marginality 125)

However it does not mean that Rushdie never presents a bright picture of women in his writings. I think, in almost every novel, the author depicts at least one woman who is beautiful and whose beauty attracts men towards her, for example Pia Aziz in *Midnight’s Children*. She is a flamboyant actress. She has been presented as aunt of Saleem and wife of Hanif on one hand while on the other she is a woman who belongs to Homi Catrack. She is, however, a drama queen. According to Saleem Sinai, who remarks:

My mumani—my aunty—the divine Pia Aziz: to live with her was to exist in the hot sticky heart of a Bombay talkie. [...] Deprived of film roles, Pia had turned her life into a feature picture” (MC 13).

As Pia Aziz was unable to act, she transforms her life into a movie. Salman Rushdie through her character tries to break the dominance of male chauvinism by making her husband Hanif afraid of melodrama while Pia is able to create the melodramatic atmosphere as much as possible. Pia despite the fact that she is a woman, she is able to create that magic which is more impressive than the description of midnight’s children. She has captivating charms that attract even Saleem who is a type of a horny person. Not only this, she almost mesmerizes him who is about to reach his age of puberty. It will not be wrong to mention that she has the power to capture the attention of anyone who comes across her. Her enchantment is spellbinding indeed. In a way we can say that Pia Azia has been presented as an empowered woman in the novel *Midnight’s Children*.

In the same manner Arjumand Harappa in *Shame* has been presented as an empowered woman having exceptional beauty. She has been modelled on the character of empowered politician of Pakistan Benazir Bhutto. In the novel, she is the daughter of Iskander, who is a powerful politician as well as a playboy. She also gets a popular nickname “the Virgin Ironpants”. This nickname has been

given to her by the people because she goes on rejecting the proposals of marriage by prospective suitors. She loves her father Iskander deeply though he is a cruel and corrupt person. She remains oblivious to this dark aspect of her father and idolizes him and makes him a saintly martyr after his death. Her feminine charm is such that men and women - all feel attracted towards her. Thus, her character has been presented as an empowered woman in the novel *Shame*.

Ayesha in *The Satanic Verses*, has been treated as a prophetess of dream sequences of Gibreel. Salman Rushdie presents her as the carrier of messages from the angel Gibreel to the village people. That means she has been assigned a very important role. When she brings the message to the village people that Mishal, wife of Mirza Saeed Akhtar, has been suffering from cancer and that all the people of the village must pay a visit on foot to Mecca as a pilgrimage if they wish to cure her of this illness. At the same time she assures the people that the Arabian Sea will give them the way by parting its water into two miraculously. People believe her become her followers and finally start their pilgrimage. That is a different matter that these people are drowned in the sea, however we find her enchanting way of persuading people is miraculous and this is the thing that makes her an empowered woman.

Qara Koz in *The Enchantress of Florence*; is the most extraordinary and wonderful woman who is the supposed ancestor of the protagonist of the novel. She is a magician who is extremely beautiful. As she starts her journey for East to West, she becomes a symbol of Florence. The description of the beauty of Qara Koz is indeed very grand. She possesses such enchanting power that even, the great Akbar is obliged to conjure her up so that he may fall in love with her. Qara Koz has been made so powerful an enchantress that Dahwanth becomes immortal when he draws a painting of Qara Koz. Thus, we see that all these women have been delineated as empowered women by Salman Rushdie in his novels.

In *Midnight’s Children*, Parvati possesses bewitching beauty; Jamila Singer, Emerald Zulfikar and Lila Sabarmati – all are presented as extraordinarily charming. There are some other female characters that play their minor roles, are also portrayed as attractive in their sexuality. Sundari, who is a beggar girl, has a charming face which is though scarred so that she may be protected from blinding people. Then we have a description of twin sisters who are unnamed in the novel:

...despite their impressive plainness both possessed the ability of making every man who saw them fall hopelessly and often suicidally in love. (MC 225)

Salman Rushdie presents female sexuality as a powerful tool to destroy male dominance in a way that it becomes a threat of loss of male identity. In *Midnight’s Children* Parvati protects Saleem by hiding him inside the basket and taking him out of Bangladesh, and this makes her an empowered woman who becomes a refuge for the protagonist. Another woman character Amina (Mumtaz) protects Nadir Khan by spending a long time in the care of him in his underground hiding. Jamila Singer shows her empowered character when she exiles her brother away from the Pakistani army because he cherished unlawful feelings for her. By presenting attractive women powerful, Salman Rushdie gives meaning to them. In *Midnight’s Children* women are empowered so much so that they assume an enough active role in the novel. According to Weickgenannt what Rushdie wants to say in

the novel is that “Indian women. . . [Must] represent the essence of Indian culture and the core of the authentically Indian nation” (The Nation’s Monstrous Women: Wives, Widows and Witches in Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* 66)

Thus it can be said that Salman Rushdie does not portray all the women characters in *Midnight’s Children* in a negative way.

Salman Rushdie’s *Shame* is one of those novels in which he has focussed on Pakistan’s history which represents its political conditions. This work has been taken as a feminist novel. The author shows his intention by declaring that he is going to write “her story” in place of “his story” i.e. he means to write about the empowerment of women. When we assess the novel from the feminist point of view, we find that there is an effort on the part of the author to challenge the male authority. There are women characters which highlight women’s achievements and become emblematic sign of Pakistan whereas the male characters such as General Ziaul Haq and Zulfikar Ali Bhutto have been presented in satiric vein as they represent the rulers of history in Pakistan.

When Mr. Shakil, a representative of patriarchal behaviour imprisons his three daughters in a mansion and deprives them of their basic rights, he becomes the object of satire on the part of the author. The women characters become a prey to repression on the part of the patriarchal world:

Repression is a seamless garment; a society which is authoritarian in social and sexual codes, which crushes its women beneath the intolerable burdens of honour and propriety, breeds repression of other kinds as well (*Shame* 173)

This very statement of Salman Rushdie shows that this an injustice which becomes the root cause of women subjugation by patriarchal system. This world has become like a cage just as the mansion in which the three female characters Chhunni, Munnee, and Bunny, had been imprisoned. By this Salman Rushdie wants to bring home the point that this social injustice must be eradicated which has been continuing for centuries. He means to emphasize the fact that the subjugation of women will result in the division of Indian community. Symbolically these female characters represent the three schisms as India, Pakistan and English rule. Rushdie’s presentation of Mr. Shakil’s three daughters highlights the fact that in all the three countries India, Pakistan and Britain, women are always at receiving ends at the hands of male dominated cultures. The emotions of women have ever been exploited and this thing has been presented by Rushdie in the way that one of the three sisters becomes pregnant and then the other two sisters try to conceal the shame. And this shows that the sexuality of women is still not valued and is a root cause of their fear in the society.

Shame is a novel in which Salman Rushdie questions patriarchal dominance which kills women’s desire for selfhood which loses its identity. When Sufiya, a girl child, is born in the rich family of national leader Raza Hyder, she also is deprived of any freedom and enjoyment only because her parents had hoped to beget a male child. The author tries to establish the point that this treatment has become the greatest hindrance in the empowerment of women. Sufiya’s life begins as an autistic child who is utterly unaware of her own self. She is treated as if she is an object of shame and this proves that a woman is like a slave in the society.

Again, when Omar as a doctor treats Sufiya’s illness, he feels sympathy for her young age and marries her to get control over her shame. When Sufiya realizes this, her anger becomes furious and results in deaths and torments on her community. Regarding the subjugation of women in *Shame* Samir Dayal opines:

Men and women in the Third world invariably seem condemned to a stereotypically feudal, patriarchal, or neo-colonialist social structure in which women are subordinated. (Dayal, Samir. “The Liminalities of Nation and Gender: Salman Rushdie’s *Shame* 48)

Sufiya Zinobia, being a subjugated woman, becomes passive in spite of the fact she is the central character in the novel. She indeed, has been portrayed as a peripheral character. The point Rushdie wants to bring home is that women should be empowered and should no more remain peripheral. They must be historicized as powerful identities. Sufiya becomes the embodiment of shame enforced by the society. Thus, in his novel *Shame*, Salman Rushdie historicizes woman by presenting the dark aspect of her life making it an important core aspect of this novel. In a way he seems to highlight the point that power must also be invested in women so that they may remain no more marginalized. The novelist wishes to awake the public conscience regarding the peripheral status of women; it should be discarded and women should be empowered.

Conclusion

Thus Salman Rushdie, in his novel *Shame* raises his voice against the patriarchal as well as the matriarchal construct. In a way, the author seems to suggest that a woman’s search for self identity should not end up in an epiphany of multiple selves. This deprives her of the identity which is required for the true self of a woman. We see that Sufia gets the treatment on the hands of her parents as if she is an idiot simply because she is a female child. However this very thing makes her realize her strength of being a beautiful woman.

Salman Rushdie ends his novel on the note of courage on the part of its protagonist Sufia who slays her husband who used to treat her as if she was an icon of shame. He enslaves her and deprives her of her basic freedom of enjoying life. Rushdie gets success in proving that an author’s primary interest should be in portraying women as powerful players, not as fetishized bodies. Rushdie wants to bring home the point that a woman stays with her husband not as a slave or a weak person rather she has the power of withstanding all ordeals for the sake of her family pride. This can be done only when she is an empowered person.

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