

GENDER AND VIOLENCE: A CRITICAL STUDY OF SALMAN RUSHDIE'S *SHAME*

TANVI AGRAWAL

Department of English Studies, Dayalbagh Educational Institute, Agra, India

ABSTRACT

The concept of 'gender' is an important phenomenon in the field of literature which is widely discussed by feminist critics. Feminism challenges the set norms leading to the gender differences. It considers the inequality on the grounds of gender difference a key to violence against woman. In the Post-Colonial literature, the issue of violence against woman has caught the attention of several writers who explore this issue on broader level and trace the root cause of its occurrence. Salman Rushdie, one of the famous novelists, projects violence on the grounds of gender and class in his third novel *Shame* which is the major concern of the paper. Although the novel fictionalizes the political history of Pakistan but simultaneously deals with the private lives of characters. The political oppression is continuously compared with the sufferings of women and servants caused by their superiors. The paper explores the pattern of male domination and female submission in the novel *Shame*.

KEYWORDS: Gender, Violence, Feminism, Oppression, Post-Colonialism

INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon 'gender' refers to the distinction between the opposite sexes i.e. male and female and the physical attributes that each possess. The concept of gender becomes complex when it is viewed from the perspective of masculinity and femininity as one group of sex proves and tries to justify its supremacy over the other on several grounds which pave way to the occurrence of different forms of violence. Feminist discourse studies the pattern of gender difference and tries to redefine it from a different perspective and struggles against the oppression by rejecting the established patriarchal system of society. The feminist critics raise their voice against patriarchy, a system which invests power in men and marginalizes women.

The contemporary famous Indian writer Salman Rushdie is known for his witticism and his courage to take up the dangerous and controversial themes such as politics, religion and gender issues. His famous novels are *Midnight's Children* (1980), *The Satanic Verses* (1988) including *The Moor's Last Sigh* (1995), *The Ground beneath Her Feet* (1999) and *The Enchantress of Florence* (2008). Likewise, his third novel *Shame* (1983) explores the sensitive issues raised in previous novels.

The novel narrates the history of a nation and its development. The nation, it is about, stands for Pakistan although not directly referred. Superficially it is about the development of two families belonging to politics, the Harappas and the Hyders based upon true political figures but it underlies the struggle of women for a space in the world of men. The novel is overcrowded with too many characters and incidents reflecting over a number of themes such as family and marriage, history, Colonialism and Post-Colonialism and religion. The major concern of this paper is in regard to the role of women in the novel. The narrator has profoundly merged the political history of Pakistan with the condition of woman in an Islamic society where the woman is suppressed to a great extent.

The major character is Sufiya Zenobia, the eldest daughter of Raza Hyder. She is the embodiment of shame. The first reason of her shame is born to be a girl instead of being a boy as her mother Bilquis wished for a boy. The second cause is her contract to brain fever in her childhood and in order to cure disease she is given a potion prepared by local hakim which restricts her mental development at the age of seven. She is the chief protagonist as the narrator states, "this is a novel about Sufiya Zenobia...or perhaps it would be more accurate, if also more opaque, to say that Sufiya Zinobia is about this novel."(1983: 59) She takes the shame of society imposed upon her which manifests itself into a furious beast and as a result she commits heinous crimes but remains oblivious to them. Her violent outburst is the reflection of all shame deposited in her. Rushdie got inspiration to create this character from the murder of Anna Muhammad by her Pakistani father in London, after knowing about her affair with a non muslim boy. The narrator says, "my Sufiya Zinobia grew out of the corpse of that murdered girl."(116) Although Sufiya is not physically capable to harm anyone but it is her rage that results in many deaths. Her reaction to the repression posed by society and family conveys the idea that the excess of shame is fought with excess of shamelessness. She represents dual quality of beauty and beast or peace and violence.

Likewise, the three Shakil sisters who mark the beginning of the novel, exhibit the same idea. The sisters are imprisoned in their own house by their father in order to escape the situation leading to shame so that none can get the opportunity to commit a mistake. This confinement suppresses their personalities. They would imagine the naked man, there were rumors that they explored their sexuality through their bodies and wished their father to die sooner. Therefore after the death of Mr. Shakil, they released their repressed feelings. The gala party thrown by Shakil sisters is the repercussion of the repressed shame in the private life. In the words of Munnee, the party is "the proof of his failure to impose his will on us."(15) During party one of them becomes pregnant and in order to protect themselves, they all manifest the signs of pregnancy so nobody gets to know the real mother. The child Omar is raised with shame free attitude. No religious ceremony is performed on the occasion of child birth. Neither the mothers do call for prayers, nor the father whisper words of god in his ear, nor they shave Omar's hair nor circumcise him. On the whole, the sisters release the repression imposed by their father.

Naveed, the second daughter of Raza Hyder, suffers oppression in matrimonial ties which she thought to be a key to one's freedom. For her, marriage ceremony will make her free from patriarchal oppression as her position of being daughter will shift to be a mother. She fails to realize that she will become someone's wife also. Naveed rejects the groom on the eve of her marriage and proudly announces her wish to marry Captain Talvar but the change of groom does not bring any change in the condition of woman. Naveed fails to escape the sufferings. She becomes a baby making machine. Her pregnancy is an example of man's supremacy over woman. When Raza asks Talvar and Naveed to prevent more pregnancies, Talvar denies and Naveed remains silent in a position to obey her husband. "He came to her once a year and ordered her to get ready, because it was time to plant the seed until she felt like a vegetable patch whose naturally fertile soil was being worn out by an over-zealous gardener and understood that there was no hope for women in the world."(207) Finally when she finds no way to escape the oppression, she commits suicide. In her note, she mentions "her terror of the arithmetical progression of babies marching out of her womb."(228)

As per the Islamic culture, the wife is known as 'Begum' followed by husband's surname. She loses her identity by losing her name. In other words, she remains subject to someone else's power. The only change is the shift in power from father to husband.

By calling Naveed 'Begum Naveed Talvar' and Sufiya 'Mrs. Shakil', Rushdie reminds the reader the practice of changed name constantly. It demonstrates the idea that a woman does not belong to her father after marriage and becomes an item of property of her husband.

In an Islamic marriage, the *haq mehar* is the dowry the groom and his family offers to bride but this traditional concept is replaced by the modern approaches which treat dowry as a financial amount given by bride's family to the groom. Thus the financial aspect in marriage becomes the cause of several worries. For example, when Bilquis meets Raza, she does not have anything, not even clothes on her body. Raza gives her cloths and everything else. He remarks that being her would be husband it is his duty to which Bilquis replies, "but husband could I, without hope of a dowry, ever find?"(66) which reflects the modern approach. In richer class, the reason can vary as in this novel the political reasons become the base for marriage. The Harappa and the Hyder plan or fix marriages with political interest. Raza agrees to the match of Naveed and Haroun in order to please the President and to gain the privileged position, not concerning the bad reputation of Haroun and his daughter's happiness.

Sufiya's marriage is conducted shamelessly. Bilquis wants to get rid of her daughter. While discussing with Raza about Sufiya she says, "a woman does not have to be a brain box. In many opinions brains are a positive disadvantage to a woman in marriage."(161) Omar, a doctor marries Sufiya eventually in order to gain control over her shame which has manifested into a deadly fury. The marriage appears to be out of good will but is actually an assertion of control and power over her.

However, apart from husband, oppression comes from families also in some degree. For instance, Bariamma, the head of the Hyder family, an old and blind lady who sleeps in a room with all the women of the family including married ones. The narrator tells, "they still live in the old village way...in which it was believed that the mere fact of being married did not absolve a woman of the shame and dishonor that results from the knowledge that she sleeps regularly with a man."(74) The arrangement leads to a shameless situation. The men enter in the room when it is dark, hear Bariamma's fake snores as sirens to do their duty without knowing who are their wives, niece or sisters among them.

Another example of shamelessness can be seen when Shahbanou, the maid of Sufiya fills Sufiya's wife obligations. She becomes pregnant with Omar's baby. This act of adultery is justified by the fact that her purpose is to protect Sufiya. The anger and shame grows in Sufiya and she becomes a beast. As a result, she kills Omar, the figure of oppression in her life. The narrator gives message, "the Beast of shame cannot be held for long within any one frame of flesh and blood, because it grows, it feeds and swells, until the vessel bursts."(286)

Rani, wife of Iskandar Harappa, narrates a different version of history from female perspective through her embroidered work. She gives voice to the history of women silenced by the official patriarchal system of the society. What she could not tell throughout her life is conveyed by her eighteen shawls which she gives to her daughter Arjumand Harappa. She reveals the political and dark history of her husband portraying him as a symbol of patriarchal dominance, political corruption and autocracy. She gives it a title of 'The Shamelessness of Iskandar the Great'. On the other side, her daughter Arjumand Harappa considers her father an ideal figure and believes in him. She follows the footsteps of her father and becomes a prominent figure in politics challenging to Hyder's political culture. She realizes that to get a place in history a woman has to play a prominent role in public world. She sacrifices her desires, revolts against history and prepares herself as a political leader.

Although women have crucial role in the plot but unfortunately they meet their tragic ends. The three Shakil sisters live in seclusion while Bilquis and Rani remain reminiscence of what they were. Although Arjumand is the only woman who is not a victim but for this she has to sacrifice her womanhood in order to gain respect. The female characters are submitted to violence and in order to escape the oppression they generate a violent reaction. Sufiya suffers from psychological violence which results in brutal killings. On the contrary, Naveed has to suffer from both psychological and physical violence committed on her body and mind by her husband to which her response is directed at herself. Farah Zoroaster remains silent about her rape attempted by Omar. The servants also suffer in the novel as they are ruled by men because they are women and inferior to men and secondly by their masters and mistresses. The servants in the Shakil house live in confinement along with the three sisters, leaving their individual identities while Shahbanou is used and thrown after she pleases Omar.

Rushdie depicts women as victims rather than survivors. The figures of women move toward darkness and gloom while the male character do not exhibit any change and remain the same. The capacity of strong female characters to speak, to revolt get reduced as the society does not allow them to enjoy liberty. Being a patriarchal society, Pakistan does not give equal rights to women as the concept found in the Holy Koran is that women are below men. They are not supposed to speak as the husband's words are final and valid. Moreover Koran supports the physical punishment in case wife is disobedient. They must live under the control of men. In this way, women suffer 'double colonization'. They are subjects to male's rule and treated as 'other' by their ruling male counterparts. Throughout the novel, Rushdie depicts the struggle of women in a society which is supposed to be modern.

REFERENCES

1. Rushdie, Salman. *Shame*. UK: Jonathan Cape, 1983. Print.
2. Ball John Clement, *Satire & The Post-Colonial Novel*: V. S. Naipaul, Chinua Achebe,
3. Salman Rushdie, London: Routledge, 2003. Print.
4. Arlandson, James M., 'Domestic Violence in Islam- The Quran on Beating Wives'
5. <<http://www.answering-islam.org/Authors/Arlandson/beating.htm>>