

# SALMAN RUSHDIE'S *SHAME*: A CULTURAL FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE

**Dr. Shadan Jafri**

Associate Professor

Department of English

Agra College, Agra

---

## ABSTRACT

*In Salman Rushdie's novel Shame, masculinity and femininity are important factors in how certain characters function. This growing desire to define identity as it relates to the characters in Shame is not only confined to the individuals in the story, but it is also an issue relevant to the nation of Pakistan as well. Most of the characters in the story are symbolic references to actual political figures in Pakistan. In addition, they also represent different periods in the country's history, both political and social. This paper attempts to study Salman Rushdie's novel Shame as a cultural feminist text.*

**Key-words:** Feminist, rebellion, honour, periphery, marginalization, oppression, women characters.

Feminism is a topic that is often viewed through a one-dimensional lens. The distinction between the members of the opposite sex and the physical attributes that each should possess appear to be quite obvious. However, the typical stance of man versus woman is not so simplistic.

In the context of postcolonial literature, the idea of feminism can be explored on a much more broad and complex level. Many postcolonial authors study the issue of feminism and gender with expressing their ideas about postcolonialism. The postcolonial perspective of feminism justifies the very common notion about women in any colonized country like India, is developed under the impression that women are 'Other', 'marginalized'. The postcolonial feminist discourse is predominantly political. It is concerned with the struggle against oppression and injustice. Feminism is based on gender politics- man's domination of woman and woman's resistance and struggle against oppression and injustice.

While defining women's place in the globally prevalent patriarchal set up, following statement by Virginia Woolf voices the sentiments of millions of her sisters. She bemoans the unenviable position of women in these words:

"A very queer, composite being thus emerges. Imaginatively, she is of the highest importance; practically she is completely insignificant. She provides poetry from cover to cover: she is all but absent from history. She dominates the lives of Kings and Conquerors in fiction; in fact she was the slave of any boy whose parents forced a ring upon her finger. Some of the most inspired words, some of the most profound thoughts in literature fall from her lips; in real life she could hardly read, could scarcely spell, and was the property of her husband." (Woolf 41)

Simone de Beauvoir's classic observation and declaration of woman as 'the second sex' also focuses upon the fact that a woman is defined and differentiated with reference to man, and not man with reference to woman. It is true of the Indian women despite numerous laws and constitutional safeguards pronounced in her favour. She still continues to be defined with respect to man, and to be regarded as subordinate to him. There is, however, some change in the attitude of the woman herself, who with access to education and exposure outside the family, has begun to perceive herself as an individual in her own right.

Salman Rushdie's feminist project of *Shame*, his fantasy of female rebellion reconstructs the sordid political history of Pakistan bringing to light the deep socio-cultural imbalances that have reshaped its history. Rushdie uses the technique of magic-realism, dream worlds and fairylands to launch his attacks on state censorships, nationalisms, the coups, murders and rigged elections.

*Shame* is a study of the psyche of a defeated culture. The male ego, thwarted on all sides, finds in women its only material possession that must be protected if she belongs to oneself or robbed if she belongs to another.

As a Muslim code of conduct, 'shame' or 'Sharam', the Urdu equivalent reproduces the gendered role of female passivity, withholding from women other definitions of femininity. Sharam, as the narrator of *Shame*, denotes "embarrassment, discomfiture, decency, modesty, shyness, the sense of having an ordained place in the world." (39)

So long as women experience is concerned, 'Sharam' is a family honor which is to be preserved and in this sense a woman's honor is but an extension of the male members she is dependent upon, it could be her father, her brother or her husband. They have no identity of their own, and a woman is considered 'Shameless' if she does anything against the wishes of these male-member representatives. Shame, is thus regarded as a specifically female attribute.

Sufiya Zinobia, the character to whom the novel's title alludes, is known as her mother's shame because, as the first-born child, she should have been a boy. Her parents, Raza and Bilquis Hyder, are so certain that their first-born will be a son that they plan "his" life even before "he" is born. Raza's staccato exclamation of disbelief – "Genitalia! Can! Be! Obscured." (94) – as he searches for the slightest hint of a male sex organ on his daughter's body, condemns her to the status of a castrated boy. Aijaz Ahmed writes, "...Sufiya Zinobia, the girl who was supposed to have been a boy, the 'miracle which went wrong', the demented child, who was born blushing, and is Shame personified"(145).

Sufiya Zinobia is the link between the stark title of the book and its many disjointed, irregular, straggling narratives. She experiences unending shame which begins at birth, and haunts her all her life, the humiliation keeps building until it erupts in the form of a beast that punishes male offenders. Women's feelings of inadequacy feed the beast inside her, causing it to grow more monstrous each day. Sufiya is transformed into an avenging angel, who attempts to twist off the head of the man whom her sister is forced to marry and succeeds in decapitating four "goondas" after they have sex with her.

The fantastic elements of her character demonstrate how monstrous is women's humiliation to look at, if only it were something that could be seen. Thus, Rushdie succeeds in representing

women's shame in the form of anger and self-pride rather than embarrassment and family honor and female modesty.

Rushdie has aligned 'izzat' and 'sharam' with an aim or objective to examine Indo-Pakistani women's performance of seemingly "traditional" gender roles, keeping in mind their race, class, status and other social factors. The narrator in *Shame*, a fictional version of Rushdie himself tells four stories drawn from the annals of everyday life. One of the narrative functions of the author-in-the-text is to shatter the smooth surface of mimetic representation with fragments of silenced stories. The first two stories speak of Pakistani women as the victims of male violence, while the other two tell a tale of power and rebellion. Although the author-in-the-text describes his Pakistan as an imaginary country that is refracted through the experience of an immigrant in Britain and the perspective of a writer-in-exile, the crucial determinant of race drops out of a narrative that traces "the roots of violence" (124) back East. While making visible the invisible baggage the immigrant carries from Pakistan to Britain, the narrator obscures the role of British racism in the community's response to a 'crime of honor'.

Aijaz Ahmad in his essay on *Shame* points out to us that Rushdie "living in the contemporary milieu of the British Left", (143) was not "untouched by certain kinds of feminism; and he is clearly aware, and quite capable of effective narrativization, of many kinds of women's oppression in our societies" (143). Thus, we read in *Shame*, the stories of Isky and Raza, as the central narrative and those of Bilquis and Rani on the periphery. But, here these sub-altern portraits and their episodes control the heroes at the centre, and their high-profile political lives. Once again to quote Ahmad, "the fire at the time of Partition which burns away the brocades of continuity and the eyebrows of belonging from Bilquis's vulnerable female body, while she is left with nothing save the 'dopatta of honour' in which she wraps herself as an only refuge; and the other episode, towards the end, when Rani sequestered once more on her rural estate; takes stock of her life and embroiders eighteen shawls on which she traces, in intricate representational design, the debaucheries and cruelties of her husband's full career." (143). We have another real side of the women's characters that correspond to the reality in our society. eg, the last images of Bilquis, where she is an aged woman with defeated dreams. She has given up hopes and covered herself in black veils, so to make permanent the distance between herself and the male dominated world of which she has always been a captive. The episode in which Good News Hyder hangs herself in order to escape the constant, mad demand upon her procreativity is a pointer to the condition of women in our society. But, these examples can be construed as protests against male dominion or subversion of male authority.

In this gallery of women characters in the novel, we come across a frigid and desexualized Arjumand, "the Virgin Ironpants" Harappa. It is widely known and acknowledged that the character of Arjumand Harappa is modeled on Benazir Bhutto, former Prime Minister of Pakistan. As noted in the book, *Women and Politics in Islam*, which covers the trial of Benazir Bhutto, the Quranic stand on women's leaders is in staunch opposition. Bukhari says, "A nation that appoints a woman as its ruler shall never prosper." (zakaria97). Yet a number of women have attained high political positions in countries like Pakistan, Bangladesh and India.

All the major female characters of the novel have one quality in common- the desire to wreck vengeance upon their men and the male-oriented customs that have defined their wretchedness. They do this either publicly or secretly. Sufiya glorifies this process by literally becoming a werewolf, devouring men. She has the ability to convert her shame into a source of energy. Her blushing is a psychosomatic event that causes her face to burn with the intensity of fire. The redness of her face is the sign of her shame but also of the rage smoldering inside women. Sufiya represents the effort to imagine a different outcome for women who are the victims of male dominance and violence. Women are naturally gifted with larger cultural sensibilities and a greater consciousness. It is part of their creative potential. Sufiya also experiences shame, except that her response is redirected at the outside world. She is an exceptional woman because she not only feels her own shame but also the unfelt shame of others, men in particular.

Men are forbidden to feel shame, for that would destroy their pride. This means that they hold their heads high only by disavowing their shameful actions. Rushdie therefore makes culture feminine in gender. Deriding culture as womanish, the men forfeit it altogether thereby forfeiting consciousness.

Rushdie's representation of women in the novel occupies a large portion of the book. The issue of misogyny is a central issue and the absence of any substantial male figures from among the oppressed and oppositional strata in the book is a pointer towards a feminist perspective. Rushdie has often declared himself a socialist of sorts and can be congratulated for these representations.

## REFERENCES:

1. Ahmad, Aijaz. (2002), *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi.
2. Beauvoir, Simon de. (1997), *The Second Sex*, H.M. Harshley, London: Vintage.
3. Rushdie, Salman. (1983), *Shame*, Picador, London.
4. Woolf, Virginia. (1999), *A Room of One's Own*, UBSPI.