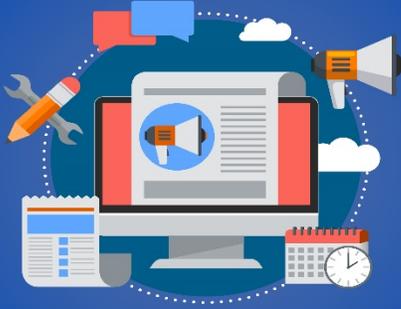


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Shamelessness and Shame are the Roots of Violence: A Socio-Cultural Study of Rushdie's *Shame*

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Abstract:

Literature tries to depict the everyday world which includes cultural, ideological and political situations. Power, gender, class and culture are part of these cultural and ideological issues. These elements also affect the role of the individual and his position in society. The individual in a society undergoes struggles in this limited scope. The individual's future is also determined by these forces, his identity and his destiny. Rushdie's characters are searching for a position beyond the socio-cultural tradition. Reality is always false and painful. It is harder to understand. It is more aggressive. Rushdie uses some narrative techniques which combine both the mythical thought and new cultural presentation by way of which his individual characters become the central part throughout his fiction. Rushdie's novels are not actually depicting reality. Through his use of mythical representation of nation and characters, he tries to portray the innate nature of man towards his society. He tries to prove that the culture has a heavy influence in changing the nature of man. This paper is an attempt to study the socio-cultural effect of society upon human-being in relationship with the characters- Omar Khayyam Shakil and Sufiya Zinobia who is represented as Shamelessness and Shame respectively in Rushdie's novel.

Keywords: Shame, Shamelessness, gender, beast.

Introduction

Rushdie considers history as a changing process characterized by individuals and their plurality. He also believes that history is a collective memory of these individual- men and

women in all their notions and reflections about society. Socially man has levied many laws and restrictions to class, culture and gender under the name of power. By creating fictional characters, Rushdie tries to establish a fictional approach to human individuality. His novel *Shame* revolves around two strands of human space: political domain and human domain. Both are interlinked in the life of the characters produced. An individual in the society is subjected to these established domains which decide their life in the society. The life of the two main characters Omar Khayyam Shakil and Sufiya Zinobia undergoes these Socio-Cultural concepts which decide their life and destiny in the novel.

Omar Khayyam Shakil- Representation of Shamelessness

Omar Khayyam Shakil the central character of the novel was born to one of the three Shakil sisters. He didn't know his mother among the three. He also didn't know about his father also. So it may be said that from the beginning of his life he is experiencing a shameful life. Till he attains the age of twelve, he lives in the palace without the knowledge of the outer world. The three Shakil sisters know it very well that when Omar enters into the society, he would be questioned about his parents. When Omar asked his mothers permission to go out of the palace to study, they thought that he would feel shame about his parentage. So they instructed him that, 'Come home without hitting anyone', she instructs, 'or we will know that they have lowered your pride and made you feel the forbidden emotion of shame'. (38). In the words of Rushdie the feeling of the mothers are best expressed as,

It was not only shame that his mothers forbade Omar Khayyam to feel, but also embarrassment, discomfiture, decency, modesty, shyness, the sense of having an ordained place in the world, and other dialects of emotion for which English has no counterparts.(39)

Even the three sisters never felt any shame of their behaviour and nature. When their father was in the death bed, he asked them to meet him. When they met their father they didn't feel sad for their father's position instead they said to their father that after his death they are going to be rich. When their father heard their selfish talk he cursed them. After the death of their father only they came to understand the reason for the death of their father. Their father died because of the shame of meeting the upcoming bankruptcy. The family background of Omar is the basis of his shameless nature. His childhood shameless nature may be taken as a lesson taught by their mother. But even at the age of thirty five he still

behaves the same in any situation. In the words of Rushdie Omar is described as a person who,

...appears to be entirely without shame, 'fellow doesn't know the meaning of the word,' as if some essential part of his education has been overlooked; or perhaps he has deliberately chosen to expunge the word from his vocabulary, lest its explosive presence there amid the memories of his past and present actions shatter him ...(81)

Omar Khayyam Shakil faced many problems in his life even though he didn't feel shame for any of his attitudes and decisions. When he became a Doctor, he was asked to treat the diseased Sufiya by her father. He started visiting the family to give treatment to the girl. After some years Omar asked for the hands of Sufiya in marriage. At that time of the marriage Omar was much older than Sufiya. He was fifty whereas Sufiya was only nineteen. When all the other relatives of Sufiya were angry over Omar, Bilquis-mother of Sufiya, supported for their marriage. Omar does not feel any shame of asking for a small girl's hand in marriage. He even wishes to join in the family which killed his own brother Babar. His character is criticized by the author narrator as, "So unscrupulous is he, so shameless, that he will court an idiot in order to woo her father. Even a father who gave the order which sent eighteen bullets into the body of Babar Shakil." (144)

Sufiya Zinobia – Representation of Shame

Sufiya Zinobia born to Raza Hyder and Bilquis was never accepted as a welcoming child in the family. Bilquis refers to her as, "That birdbrain, that mouse! I must accept it: she is my shame" (101) Sufiya is always regarded as a symbol of shame by her mother. During her childhood, she developed a brain fever and she started to behave in an idiotic manner. That indifferent behaviour of Sufiya made everyone hate her. When her younger sister Naveed was born, her mother showered all her affection over her. Quite naturally, Sufiya was longing for her mother's love and affection. Even Naveed was given a nickname, 'Good News' which indicates that she is a welcoming child just like the monsoon wind which gives soothing effect to all the creatures. On the other hand Sufiya Zinobia was considered as,

...her parents' burden, her mother's shame, remained as dry as the desert. Groans, insults, even the wild blows of exasperation rained on her instead; but such rain yields no moisture. Her spirit parched for lack of affection, she nevertheless managed, when love was in her vicinity, to glow happily just to be near the precious thing. (121)

Day by day the isolated feeling of Sufiya made her sick, which led her to develop the habit of somnambulism. Because of this disease she did some shocking and terrible activities which she never remembered after she became normal. Once she was found among the corpses of the turkey yard. She nearly killed two hundred and eighteen turkeys. She “had torn off their heads and then reached down into their bodies to draw their guts up through their necks with her tiny and weaponless hands.”(138) .There was a beast inside the body of the beautiful Sufiya. The rejection of the family members for the presence of Sufiya made her feel that she is not wanted in the family. This isolated feeling made her to think and rethink about her birth and she is not able to find out the answer why everyone hates her. This question started to feed the beast inside her. The beast grew in her day by day by all the negations of the family and at times it came out of her and showed the hidden violence inside her. Even in the marriage of Naveed and Talvar, Sufiya grabbed Talvar by the head and tried to rip off Talvar's neck. At this moment she was considered as the family's shame.

Sufiya, as all others was a longing child for love. She expected others especially her mother to take care of her and she earned for love from her mother. But that was never showered on her. When someone spoke loveable words to others, she felt that it is meant for her and she felt happy. The feeling of Sufiya is best expressed in the lines, “how she glows with pleasure when she hears loving words, even though they are almost always meant for someone else...”(121). Sufiya was used to groans and insults directly which made her emotionless. She felt herself as a desert. When someone spoke loveable words or showed affection to her, she immediately blushed. This blushing of Sufiya was also criticized by others. When all the family members paid a courtesy visit to the age old Bariamma, she tried to kiss Sufiya. But after doing so she immediately get shocked of the reaction given by the little girl. It was because when she kissed the girl “her lips had been mildly burned by a sudden rush of heat...” (121). In the situation like this, a mother would always support her child. But in the case of Sufiya, Bilquis shouted to everyone, “just don't even look at her now! What is this? Anyone puts eyes on her or tells her two words and she goes red, red like a chilli! I swear. What normal child goes to beetroot hot that her clothes can smell of burning? But what to do, she went wrong and that's that, we must just grin and bear.”(121). All this statement of Bilquis shows that how much hatred she has for her elder daughter. So far in her life Sufiya was expecting a person who would shower love on her. When Omar married Sufiya, there was a change in the attitude of Sufiya. She never behaved violently. But the violence grew again when she started suspecting the behaviour of Omar and Shahbanou.

At first she thought that Shahbanou, the ayah is actually helping her. Afterwards she realized that the relationship between them is not genuine. She started searching answers for the questions in her mind about marriage, husband, babies and so on. This stirred a fiery change in her. The author narrator says, “There is an ocean. She feels its tide. And, somewhere in its depths, a Beast, Stirring.”(215) After this she killed four adolescent boys. When the arrogant behaviour of Sufiya was reported to Raza Hyder, he discussed this matter with Omar. At last both of them decided to put her in the attic room of the house and to keep her unconscious with injections. They couldn’t decide to which level the arrogance of Sufiya would go. Although they took much care in her unconscious stage, the beast in her gave her the strength to escape from her own house. Both Raza and Omar couldn’t find her. But they receive messages regarding a white panther which is killing many birds, domestic animals and sometimes men. The family kept the secret about Sufiya without anyone’s knowledge. At last Sufiya killed her husband in his own palace. The beast in her killed her life.

The feeling of shame

Shame is a feeling, which everyone experiences in their own life at one time or other. The change that happens in the individual because of the experience of this feeling is different based upon the nature of the person. Shameful activities are done by almost all of the human beings in their life time. The author narrator rightly says,

Shameful things are done: lies, loose living, disrespect for one’s elders, failure to love one’s national flag, incorrect voting at elections, over-eating, extramarital sex, autobiographical novels, cheating at cards, maltreatment of womenfolk, examination failures, smuggling, throwing one’s wicket away at the crucial point of a Test Match...(122)

When a person doesn’t feel shame for doing all these activities, then he is termed as shameless person. This happened with the character of Omar, who didn’t feel any shame of his birth or about his marriage in the family which killed his brother. On the other hand in the case of Sufiya Zinobia, who was considered as “a family’s shame made flesh, had discovered in the labyrinths of her unconscious self the hidden path that links *sharam* to violence...” (139) was full of love and innocence and expects the cordial relationship from everyone. She trusted everyone around her. When the motherly affection was rejected from her mother’s side, she tried to manage it with the relationship of Shahbanou, the ayah. Shahbanou was appointed to take care of the girl. In the beginning Sufiya treated and trusted Shahbanou as her

mother substitute. She discussed with her the matters that usually a girl discusses with her mother. Shahbanou also took great care of her. But when Sufiya got married with Omar, Shahbanou gets changed in her attitude. Sufiya's nature provided courage to Shahbanou to have the illegal relationship with Omar. Even Omar didn't follow the moral ethics of the marriage. With her childlike innocence Sufiya believed Shahbanou who actually slept with her husband Omar. She also deceived her. She became pregnant because of Omar. Omar never felt any shame to lead an illegal life with Shahbanou. Instead he enjoyed the night life. Each and every time when Sufiya did something in somnambulism, her mother grew angry over her behaviour. She often used harsh words against her. The narrator described Sufiya as a saint because she endured all the shame of her family members. Actually Raza Hyder, his father has to feel shameful when he ordered his men to kill Babar Shakil. His mother Bilquis has to feel ashamed for all her activities. Sufiya's sister Naveed has to feel ashamed because before marriage itself she lost her chastity to Talvar. But no one felt shameful. Instead the innocent Sufiya suffered for all the other shameful characters around her. It is her destiny that she was not able to lead a normal life like all the other girls. Thus all the characters whomever Sufiya believed cheated her. At first as all the other children, she believed in her mother who never showed the love and affection of a mother towards a child to her. Next, Shahbanou whom she believed as a mother substitute also cheated her by having an illicit affair with her husband. All this circumstances made her understand that life is not in her hands. And it also made her understand clearly that she cannot get her life back. The feeling of shame was now felt by Sufiya of having lost her husband in the hands of the ayah. She felt shameful that she couldn't lead a life with her husband as others. All these memories made her think that she is not fit to survive in her present life. She needed an outlet for all her pent up feeling of revenge towards her husband and all the other characters who used her innocence for their cheap wish. In the beginning she showed all her blood thirsty revenge on people who encountered her in the time of night. As a girl of tradition, she initially hesitated to kill her husband and that is why she started to kill all other adults who wished to have physical relationship with her. Later on, the feeling of rage was developed so brutally in her that she started to kill all the animals and birds of the area But this thirst will never quench itself without seeing the death of her husband who used her life for his own lust.

Towards the end of the novel all the characters faced their horrible destiny for their shameful character. Raza Hyder and Bilquis were murdered by the three Shakil sisters. The three Shakil sisters took their revenge upon Raza for the death of Babar Shakil. They told

Omar that he deserves punishment for he married the girl of the family which killed his brother. They scolded Omar as a person who has to feel shame for his activities.”It became obvious to him that his mothers hated him, and to his surprise he found the idea of that hatred too terrible to be borne”(278). Omar started to experience the pain of hatred and starts to understand the pain of the innocent girl Sufiya. He started to feel that the beast of Shame has many faces. He also starts to understand that when the time comes, the beast can take any form. The hatred of his mothers’ made him feel that the beast is slowly entering into him and he feels as if it has started to feed itself with the feeling of shame.

Conclusion

Everywhere in the world there are shame and shameless characters who are leading their life calmly. But this novel *Shame* tries to explain the life of a character which feels the utmost shame in its life like Sufiya and the shameless character like Omar. Rushdie is right in saying that Shamelessness and shame are the root cause of violence in the society. When the marriage happened between these two shameless and shame characters, there starts the drift in their marriage life. When Sufiya starts to understand about the life of all the shameless character she is not able to fit herself in the same house where the others live. The beast inside her never allowed her to stay or to endure pains instead of others. So the white panther as described by others, she started punishing everyone. This beastliness ended with the death of her own husband by her own hands. All the other shameless characters in the novel also faced their death in a shameful manner.

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