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Gender: A Shame in Salman Rushdie's Novel *Shame*

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Abstract:

The present study is concerned with the images of gender in Salman Rushdie's *Shame* that is considered 'a shame' in the novel. It focuses and analyses many characters like Sufiya Zinobia and Omar Khayyam. By drawing the attention of gender bias, also it analyses the fundamental structures of gender with respect to shamelessness. It strives to unravel the relationship between gender and shame as it is conceptualized in the novel. Like most of Rushdie's work, this book was written in the style of Magic Realism. The central theme of the novel is that violence is born out of shame and the birth becomes the ill omen of their shame. The concepts of shame and shamelessness are explored through all of the characters. *Shame* discusses heritage, authenticity, truth, and, of course, shame and shamelessness, as well as the impact of all these themes on an individual, the protagonist Omar Khayyam.

Keywords: Salman Rushdie, gender, shame, shamelessness bias, birth.

'I am only telling a sort of modern fairy-tale (...); nobody need get upset, or take anything I say too seriously.' (*Shame*, 70)

The whole plot in the novel *Shame* takes place in the town named "Q", where an old man Shakil raises his three daughters Chhunni, Munnee, and Bunny very strictly that even he won't allow his daughters to talk with their neighbours and totally isolated them from the outside world. One day Shakil died and his three daughters threw a very grand party in their house by inviting some of local VIPs. In the party one of the sisters becomes pregnant. But in order to hide that shame from the outside world all three sisters pretends to be pregnant and doesn't reveal who is the real pregnant lady. One day a son is born to them and they named him as Omar Khayyam, after a renowned poet who lived in their town. The three daughters raised their son very strictly as their father did and totally isolated him from the outside world. At the age of 12, Omar tries to escape from his town and fled to another new place where he excelled in the medical field and emerges as immunologist. He became friend with a girl Sufiya Zinobia, daughter of Raza Hyder who is the real character of *Shame* in the novel. Sufiya was born to her parents when they expect a son. So even in her birth she borne the personification of shame. She has mental disorder, even in her age of 28 she thinks like girl of 9 years old. As she grows older, this shame intensifies and it expresses itself like an

inner creature. Sufiya, whom Omar eventually marries, is consumed by this inner creature, a beast, till the point in which she remains exactly what she represents.

Gender is a topic that is often viewed through a one-dimensional lens. The distinction between members of the opposite sex and the physical attributes that each should possess appear to be quite obvious. However, the typical assumption of male versus female being the only defining aspect of gender is not so simplistic. When viewed in terms of masculinity and femininity, the idea of gender can be explored on a much more broad and complex level. In the context of postcolonial literature, this is frequently the case. Postcolonialism focuses on cultural and national identity in literature produced by the people of current or former colonies in places like the Middle East, South Asia, Africa, and the Caribbean. Many postcolonial authors delve into to the issue of gender

When expressing their ideas about Postcolonialism. How an individual that lives in does, comes from, or has history with a certain country or region which has been colonized, shape his or her identity? In the work of many Middle Eastern and South Asian authors, gender is one of the best tools to use when exploring identity. In *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.

Sufiya's explosions are nothing but the explosions of her shame. Her parents and elder sister considers her as shame for their whole family. This circumstance can be seen clearly in all the families across the world. Family members of the mentally retarded children consider their children as shame and will hide them from the outside world. After her marriage with Omar, Sufiya doesn't find any advantage or caring from her husband. When she comes to know that her husband is having illegal relationship with a girl named Shahbanou, the beast within her grows up. That night she goes out from her house, rapes four boys and kills them. After this terrible act she doesn't become tired, which implies that she blends perfectly with her inner beast which she developed out of the shame she experienced. When her father Hyder and her husband Omar know this crime act they inject her twice a day in order to keep her unconscious and hide her in the attic. This doesn't suppress the beast of Sufiya, where as it stirs up and eventually she manages to escape from the house.

Sufiya Zinobia, the character to whom the novel's title alludes, is known as her mother's shame. The baby girl blushes in response to her mother's embarrassment and her father's anger. Her blushing represents a slow burning that builds with the passage of time. The humiliation keeps building until it erupts in the form of a beast that punishes male offenders. The fantastic elements of her character demonstrate how monstrous women's shame is to look at, if only it were something that could be seen. Through Sufiyia Zinobia, Rushdie introduces the imaginative possibility of women's shame producing anger and self-pride rather than embarrassment and family honour. By creating a magical character that

plays with the gendering of “Shame”, he breaks down the taken-for-grantedness of female modesty. In *Shame* Rushdie presents "tradition" as a code of conduct that prevents Asian women from fighting British racism. This reading is evident in the second ghost that haunts Sufiya.

Sufiya represents the effort to imagine a different outcome for women who are the victims of male violence. Sufiya also feels ashamed, 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. Salman Rushdie penned his novel *Shame* with the Pakistan background. Pakistani women are socialized into having strong family loyalty, the betrayal of which brings shame upon themselves and their families. Wives who are physically abused often stay with their husbands in order to preserve the family pride. But this can be applicable to all Asian women.

Rushdie’s *Shame* remains particularly interesting for its exploration of various categories and conditions of gender bias. The overlapping for Rushdie heightens their margins especially when they evoke the historical backdrop of violence in Pakistan. The novel focuses on the recent history of Pakistan, nearly synonymous with the travails of the Bhutto clan which recently re-emerged into the political eye with the ouster of Benazir Bhutto, daughter of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto who was executed by Zail ul Haq, and his brother of the recently assassinated Murtazar Bhutto. Pakistan is impossible to conceive of independently of the figure of borders, most particularly its partition from India, though Jinnah’s insistence and despite Gandhi’s bitter opposition, marks a moment in history the year 1947, thus has long been the obsession of the author as well as his own year of birth.

Shame is the basic premise of the novel, how it shapes society. The narrator tells us that the novel is ‘about Sufiya Zinobia’ who is the embodiment of shame. Therefore, since shame lurks in the corners of the novel, he corrects himself, saying that ‘it would be more accurate, if also more opaque, to say that Sufiya Zinobia is about this novel’ (*Shame*, 59). And here is the question: how did shame acquire such a feminine aura?

The novel involves shame and shamelessness, and how they affect the society and the individual. In the beginning of the narrative, the clash between these two ideas is visible in the figure of the three Shakil sisters, the mothers of the novel’s antihero, Omar Khayyam. The narrator says that they were raised with the help of ‘an iron morality that was mostly Muslim’ (*Shame*, 13), and that they had lived all their lives imprisoned in their mansion. This attitude was meant to secure the sisters’ honour, maintaining the family free of shame. Like this, none could have the opportunity to make a dishonourable mistake, since the sisters had no contact with situations that could potentially lead them to shame. Or could they still be led to shame.

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