



WOMEN IN THE CONTEXT OF NATURE, CULTURE & RELIGION IN SALMAN RUSHDIE'S NOVELS

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ABSTRACT:

Profound influence of western culture & eastern culture is clearly visible from Rushdie's Writing. He is a staunch opponent for religious fanaticism and dogmatism. The present paper tries to explore the variant sheds of women in the flux of religion and culture in Salman Rushdie's fictions. Since Rushdie is a Muslim it should be only reasonable to hold that his Muslim women characters must enjoy a special status vis-à-vis other characters. It does not however, mean that he is communal in his outlook and goals. On the contrary his intentions appear quite secular. It is only by juxtaposing one community to the other that we can have a better perspective of its beliefs and ideas. The entire gamut of Rushdie's rhetoric is to offer a reformist's view of Islam, particularly in the fast changing world. He has been immensely successful in achieving his purposes by positioning himself away from the midst of Islam i.e. the whole of the orient. Rushdie tries to delineate social conventions, cultural practices, religious dogmatism, familial and familiar relationship, the reliable burden of traditional authority which has generated a rebellion against the organized forces of oppression and injustice to women. Salman Rushdie champions the idea that women must try to overcome their suppressed roles. His protagonists deny to get suppressed under the burden of patriarchy and personal tragedies and boldly confront life and its consequences. The research paper analyses the women's sufferings and strength plights and positions in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight Children*, *Shame*, and *The Moor's Last Sigh*.

Key words: - *Social-customs, religion, culture, oppression, postmodernism, role of women etc.*

INTRODUCTION:

Midnight's Children, Salman Rushdie's Magnum Opus, concerns with partition, India's freedom, religious and cultural tussles. The novel classified into three parts; Part I depicts the major incidents that happened in India from 1915 to 1947, Part II portrays with the childhood of Ahmad Sinai, the protagonist and Part III is basically deals with emergency operations and brutalities in India during the seventies.

One fine morning Saleem's grandfather, Adam Aziz, a young doctor returned from Germany was taken to the house of Ghani Sahib, an affluent landlord in Kashmir. He was asked to examine Naseema, the ailing daughter of the landlord. He bent his body and examined the patient thoroughly through perforated sheet. Ironically, he married her later with a fine dowry. It symbolizes love cannot accommodate without conventions of society, even if society gives consent to it. According to Stuti Khanna,

“paternity, lineage, purity of blood, and religion become secondary [in *Midnight's Children*] to affective bonds forged in community settings” (406).

It is a firm reliance of a Muslim that Islam is the religion of God revealed through His messengers since ages and chiseled through Prophet Mohammed. Even a moderate propensity of mind towards disbelief in God and Prophet Mohammad is expected to raise any one's brows, because in any circumstances a Muslim should have a strong belief in the words of God. But Salman Rushdie, though born in an Indian Muslim family, is a staunch atheist. Rushdie strongly opposes the custom of Islam which vanquishes its woman beneath the unbearable thrust of integrity and prestige. He expressed his concern over strict Islamic Law. He opposed the traditional system of purdah which repressed women to such an extent that their states too, breeds violence. Rushdie perceives Islam full of

contradictions. He comes to an end that Islamic-law and Shariyat are based on shaky foundations. These outlooks make Rushdie the most controversial writer. Controversy run after him with the speed of not with the publication of his novel *Satanic Verses*. He has been issued a fatwa for blaspheming Islam through his work. *Methwold's Estate*, is an abode where Saleem culminates adolescence encircled with joyful and sparkful characters and the magician's ghetto, the place of his re-union with Parvati-the-witch are the locales ruled and governed by men. *Methwold's Estate* bears its title and its construction to Saleem's possible father William Methwold, and its inhabitants consists of powerful males: Homi Catrack, the "film magnate and racehorse-owner", Mr. Dubash, "a physicist who would become the leading light at the Trombay nuclear research base," and Commander Sabarmati, "who was one of the highest flyers in the Navy". In contrast, the wives and daughters of these illustrious figures are respectively: Toxi Catrack, the idiot who spends her days locked in her bedroom, Mrs Dubash, "beneath whose blankness a religious fanaticism lay concealed", and Lila Sabarmati, an adulteress with "expensive tastes" Here we find affluent and aspirational in contrast to women who are primitive in nature, mentally distressed or insinuated. Magician's ghetto is no different from *Methwold's Estate* as it strikes the similar demented equilibrium. As we all know, Parvati-the-witch is the most powerful sorceress in the novel, but she is submissive to "The Most Charming Man in the World", Picture Singh. The gradual degradation of the women from one perspective, the failings of the women at *Methwold's Estate* could be deciphered as Rushdie's critique of the lack of social and physical status endowed to women in Indian society. In this concern, Nicole Weickgennant, aptly argues that, "Midnight's Children's criticism is directed at the nation, which is not

prepared to let women shape it in an equal way" (76).

Rushdie has given India a wide variety of realities, and he tried to address various aspects of the country's life regarding social customs, religion, prostitution, population, woman and much more. Rushdie hits at the traditional system of Purdah observed by the Muslims. In *Midnight's Children*, he had depicted the hereditary and contemporary life that followed through India. But he found it a stagnant pool where identity and ideology are completely confused. The story of *Midnight's Children* reflects the tradition of Purdah in Muslims family—a tradition that was accepted from the times of Prophet Mohammed.

Put some cream on those rashes and blotches Amma. For the headache, there are pills. The boils must be lance. But maybe if you wore Purdah when you sat in the store... so that no disrespectful eyes could... such complaints often begin in the mind (p.15).

In *Midnight's Children*, there are women in Purdah strictly behind the perforated sheet, so much so that even the doctor is not allowed to see his patient. There are women exhibiting double standards of existence and trying to be loyal to their partners. Amina Sinai, looks after her husband and children but in the privacy of her bathroom, she telephones Nadir Khan—her lover whom she could not forget. There are others, for whom Purdah, or being loyal to one is question beyond thinking, for example Tai bibi is one such who takes pride in owning many men- as many as five hundred. There is a woman, Zohra, bold enough to invite Adam Aziz to produce children. Rushdie highlights different aspects of India. The different role of women in the society is painted with a fine brush with Rushdie.

Midnight's Children's women grapple at odds with conventional gender stereotypes. Even though, Saleem Sinai is *Midnight's Children's* protagonist, but women brandish much of the

power, beyond the sphere of culture. Depiction of women in *Midnight's Children* eliminate the familiar misconception that women are tender and submissive. Here, Naseem is submissive to the social convention that didn't allow her to get marry of her choice. Even after her marriage she revolved into Reverend Mother—an unpleasant and unattractive version of herself. As the patriarch, Aadam prevents Reverend Mother from teaching the children her religious beliefs. When Mumtaz is married to Ahmed Sinai, he changes her name to Amina, and she has no control over her new identity. When Saleem married Parvati-the-witch, he took her name from the repository of my dreams. He would change her name to Laylah once he married her. This is because he assumes control over her identity. As women, Mumtaz and Parvati have no agency over their own identities, which reflect the ill-treatment of women in patriarchal postcolonial India.

Earthly heaven Kashmir has been crippled from the very start of the conflict between India and Pakistan. *Midnight's Children* delineates the hyper realistic mortification of natural beauty of Kashmir. Tai embodied the basic instinct of Earthly heaven mentions, "I have watched the mountains being born; I have seen Emperors die." (Rushdie, 13) Tai is not a mere character in *Midnight's Children* but he is the graphic representation of beautiful Kashmir. In the Valley of Kashmir, Doctor Adam Aziz and Naseem Ghani are celestially consummated in divine love which actually reminds us of the success of true human communication when at the same time world was struggling with war. "Far away the Great War moved from crisis to crisis, while in the cobwebbed house doctor Aziz was also engaged in a total war against his sectioned patient's inexhaustible complaints." (26)

Rushdie's third novel *Shame* appeared in 1983. It is about the abominable conditions of Pakistan. It deals with the fate and fortunes of

two families of Raza Hyder and Iskandar Harappa. In the words of Timothy Brennan, "Its comic tyrants are so bitterly drawn that they induce only horror, and the comic relief Rushdie had promised comes primarily in the form of hopeless mockery on the verbal level, a willy-nilly distancing post-modern mood of automatic and humorless parody (p.210).

Rushdie's *Shame* expatiates extensively on the theme of shame and also encompasses various nuances that re associated with it. It runs on three levels—the political, the cultural and the social. There is the theme of the social mores of the background and superstitious Islamic society that multiples shame on shame through limitless repression breeding violence. In fact, this leads to psychological horrors in society. In the words of the narrator,

Repression is a seamless garment, a society which is authoritarian in its social and codes, which crushes its women beneath the intolerable burdens of honour and propriety, breeds repression of other kinds as well. Contrariwise; dictators are always—or at least in public, on other people's behalf—puritanical. (Ibid, p.173).

Sufiya Zinobia epitomizes the qualities of shame. Rushdie "personifies in her the shame of Pakistan" (Sushila Singh, p.19). The novelist had had the first-hand knowledge of a Pakistani girl who is murdered by her father in the East End of London for allegedly having made love to a white boy and brought "such a dishonor upon her family that only her blood could wash away the stain" (p.123). Caught between two cultures, she becomes a sacrificial scapegoat in expiation of the guilt her parent feel for having transplanted themselves in an alien land. Through the disfigurement of Sufiya, Rushdie creates an oppressive world that becomes really grotesque. The reader no longer recognizes her as a character, as "she evolves into a myth and a legend, a beast, lusty for kill stalking the country, naked matted with grime and blood"

(Susan, p.39). Sufiya Zinobia becomes a typical human emotion of shame in the novel. To comprehend her is to acknowledge savagery as a constituent element in national makeup. Rushdie traces the origins of Sufiya's shame thus:

And once upon a time there was a retarded daughter, who for twelve years had been given to understand that she embodied her mother's shame (p.135).

Sufiya experiences the forbidden emotion, shame, the nuances of which contribute to rarefied sensibility. In the words of the novelist, these nuances are "embarrassment, discomfiture, decency, modesty, shyness, the sense of having an ordained place in the world" (p.39).

Rushdie's novels are designed to mystify and confuse the readers. To understand his novels, one requires knowledge not only of history but also of the beliefs and culture of the two countries viz. India and Pakistan. It is in this context alone that a rational study of women characters in his novels can be made.

The Moor's Last Sigh describes a history of Zogoiby family over the ages. The novel opens in the location of Cochin — the hub of cardamoms and cumin and variety of other spices that fascinated Portuguese people other colonial rulers to India long ago. At the heart of this novel is the Portuguese family from the lineage of Vasco da Gama, who landed on the Western Ghats in 1498. Its descendant Aurora is connected with the spice merchant Abraham Zogoiby, whereas the Aurora takes interest in paintings and used to patronize painters.

"Nobody ever made a movie called Father India" derisively comments the narrator-protagonist, Moreas Zogoiby, of *The Moor's Last Sigh*, "Bharat-pita"? Sounds all wrong" (136). As per the opinion of Moreas, the "Moor" and the opinion of Salman Rushdie, the right thing is that people equate one's native land with one's mother, which results in the concept of 'Bharat-

mata'/'Mother India'. Somewhere Rushdie opines: "Motherness.... is a big idea in India, maybe our biggest: the land as mother, the mother as land, as the firm ground beneath our feet" (137). In his other literary works on the Indian subcontinent also reader can notice this notion reiterated, sometimes in a somber tone, but more often in a mocking touch, similar to his post-modernist ludicrous touch and irreverence. While depicting the character of Aurora (Da Gama) Zogoiby, the flashy mother of the Moor, however, Salman Rushdie moves further and displaces the old-fashioned image of the kind, compassionate, rural, heroic Mother (concept derived from Nargis who played the role of "Mother India" in Mehboob Khan's classic movie bearing the same title) with, in his own words, "own sort of Mother India.... metropolitan, sophisticated, noisy, angry and different". Thus, Rushdie replaces the kum-kum-clad, devout and divine Hindu lady with a bitchy, Goan Catholic/ Jewess in his love/hate novel on India, *The Moor's Last Sigh*.

The appearance of a sizzling substitute for the stereo-typed image of Mother India in the character of Aurora Zogoiby is dexterously accomplished in a truly post-modern blending of Roman, Zudaic-Christian and Hindu myths of goddess images. The imitation initiates at the earliest point in the novel (5) when Aurora, the Roman goddess of dawn/gardens, is hinted at— "Paradise of Aurora." This classical Paradise is transformed into Biblical Heaven, the throne of God Almighty, when Vasco Miranda links the Moor to Lucifer "hurled from that fabulous garden and plunged towards Pandemonium" (5). The statement, however, is emphasized that this Edenic paradise comprises in itself an "infernal private universe" (5). Aurora, in another milieu, is "a godless Madonna" in her own painting (220). Being a metropolitan dame, The Madonna, without any hesitation passing a severe sentence on her own offspring for his evil action, metamorphoses into a "monster": "O, an

age of monsters is come upon us. Kalyug, when cross-eyed red-tongued Kali, our mad dame, moves among us wreaking havoc” (288). The mythical allusions, however, have a contradictory portent in typical post-modernist essence.

Thus, the mother of Moor, Aurora Zogoiby, gorgeous and clever, zealous and rebellious, is a forceful character and at the helm of the various actions of the story. She continues early as a shrewd business woman settled in Cochin, where she looks after the spice trade of the Da Gama. Subsequently, at Bombay, she follows her uncommon talent for art, resulting in her frequent contact with some famous artists and intellectuals of her era. No men in the novel equaled the stature of Aurora, who is a multi-dimensional figure. In this story of the two families, Moor presented her as a type of Mother India figure, based on the iconic reel-life role played by the Bombay actress Nargis, in the famous film of Mehboob Khan. In this viewpoint, the narrator echoes, “Motherness.....is a big idea in India, may be our biggest: the land as mother, the mother as land, as the firm ground beneath our feet” (211).

Conclusion

The fiction of Salman Rushdie is full of women characters. There are more women than men in his *Midnight's Children* and *Shame*. Besides, women characters seem to hold key to all actions and resolutions. The women have been kept in focus; it appears, because Rushdie recognizes her as the genesis of all ideas, actions and a great shaping force. Devoid of women his fiction would be an exercise in futility. It becomes a matter of interest for any reader therefore; to explore the phenomenon of women characters however cannot be done in isolation. We have to associate her in the matrix of culture and religion as she is disseminator of culture and belief through all those male characters who owe their existence to her and are in direct or indirect reach of her influence.

She always acts as a model, irrespective of the fact whether her influence is positive or otherwise.

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