Marginalization of Women: Rushdie’s *Shame*

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Salman Ahmed Rushdie is an eminent postcolonial diasporic writer of Indian origin. He was born in a Muslim family in 1947, the year India became free from the clutches of the colonial rule. The novelist and essayist of international repute, Rushdie, started his writing with the fictional work *Grimus* (1975). His second novel *Midnights’ Children* (1981) won the Booker’s Prize. The text focuses on the simultaneous independence and partition of the two nations. He came into thick of controversies because of his novel, *The Satanic Verses*. (1988). The Muslims considered the novel to be blasphemous. The publication of the novel led to a wide range of demonstrations and protests worldwide. The publication of the text became dearer for him as the Muslim religious leader of Iran issued a fatwa. The fatwa meant that the man who takes away the life of Rushdie would get one billion dollars as a reward. As such, he continues to live under threat to his life till today. Rushdie’s fame as a novelist is immense. More than seven hundred journal articles and numerous book chapters have been published on it. In the text *Shame*, Rushdie gives his account of societal and political life in Pakistan. He is satirical of the social conditions in the country which are the resultant of undemocratic, dictatorial and unlawful political practices of the leaders of Pakistan. The present paper attempts to analyze the issue of marginalization of women in the patriarchal society of Pakistan. Rushdie tries to highlight the denial of rights to the Pakistani masses, especially the women, by the rulers. Rushdie portrays the gloomy picture of the Pakistani society in which the women have to face acute sufferings and oppression and suppression has become the talk of the day. Today when the governments of the different countries are trying their level best to uplift the status of the better half of the population (women), it is rather painful that the politics of the postcolonial rulers of Pakistan are bent on marginalizing the status of women.

Rushdie by using the technique of magical realism beautifully describes the stories in the novel *Shame*. Rushdie gives the description the first imaginary country in which the old man Shakil lives along with his three daughters named Chunee, Munee and Bunee in a mansion. The house located in a town called Q was “positioned beside an open maiden, and it was equidistant from the bazaar and the Cantt” (12). The Old Shakil keeps his daughters alienated from the rest of the world in the old mansion so as to keep them away from the influence of the white men (colonizers). He closed the mansion to avoid any interaction with the outside world of colonizers. After the death of their father, the daughters continue to remain isolated from the world, but as time passes they get rid off their parental subjugation and get fascinated by the colonizers. They organize a party in which they invite the members of the white community and the few “non-white guests-local zamindars and their wives” (16). But the non white guests abandoned “the sisters to the colonial authorities” (16). The invitation extended by the Shakil sisters can be termed as sudden infatuation of the three sisters towards the outside colourful world. Rushdie through the above description has tried to depict the culture of the Pakistani society which wants the women of Pakistan to be confined to four walls of the house.

Rushdie shows how one of the Shakil sisters becomes pregnant because a sexual act with one of the white guests invited in the party. The pregnancy of the Shakil sister resulted
in the birth of a male child (Omar Shakil). For the sake of family reputation the three sisters make a promise that none of the sisters would disclose about the illicit affair with a white man or about the resultant pregnancy. They also decide to keep secret the identity of the real mother of the child. They avoided interaction with the outside world by shutting themselves inside their own mansion at Nishapur. In the article entitled “The politics of Repression and Resistance,” Neluka Silva observes:

From the outset, the three Shakil sisters are first ‘caged’ by their father. Then they inflict self-imprisonment during their simultaneous pregnancy and continue to be entrapped in their ‘cage’. The cage-effect is so powerful that, in the final denouement, even dictators cannot escape from it...
(Kuortti 153)

An illicit affair with a white man which resulted in pregnancy of one of the Shakil sisters shows how denial of freedom to women can lead to dangerous consequences.

Sufia Zinobia is the daughter of General Hyder and Biliquis. The parents had expected a boy but by ill luck Sufia resulted. The birth of Sufia is considered as the “wrong miracle” (107) by the Hyder family as they expected male child, who can be potentially powerful as heir to their political legacy. The parents of Sufia are emotionless for her; this can be due to the cultural and political environment of society. Termed as ‘shame’ to her parents as is the title of the novel, Rushdie portrays Sufia as a retarded child who suffers from brain fever and gets retarded permanently. At the age of nineteen, she has a brain of six year old child. Sufia Zinobia gets married to Omar Shakil, but she was mentally ill to have sexual relations. Later she had sexual intercourse with four young men, and she tore off their heads. She depicts the sufferings of Pakistan masses that face oppression from the Pakistani rulers. The tyrannical rule of the rulers of Pakistan leads to miserable position of the people.

It can be said that the Child oppression and suppression of woman is the worldwide phenomenon. Critic Viney Kirpal is of the belief that oppression of women and its political outcome remains one of main themes of the text Shame. He quotes Paranjape; Kirpal who gives Rushdie’s viewpoint thus:

Rushdie tells us that in a country where women are so badly repressed as in Pakistan can never be democratic because such a society does not recognize or accept freedom as a principle in human relationships. Such a society has internalized its authoritarianism and is always tortured by guilt and shame. (Quoted in Ray 160)

Patriarchal society serves its motives by its biased attitude towards women. The society is unconcerned to female issues and their interests. Through his text Shame, Rushdie shows how the women are marginalized in a patriarchal society as the political and social set-up is gender-biased. Rushdie shows his pain and anguish on the oppressions and suppressions to which women gets subjected to. He portrays the sufferings of women through the fictional women characters like Biliquis Hyder, Rani Harappa, Sufia Zinnobia, Arjumabad Harappa and Naveed Hyder. Aijaz Ahmad portrays how women lose their identity in the Pakistani society which is full of repressions for women. He writes:

In general, moreover, what we find is a gallery of women
who are frigid and desexualized (Arjumabad, the ‘Virgin Ironpants’), demented and moronic (the twenty-odd years of Zinobia's childhood), dulled into nullity (Farah), driven to despair (Rani, Bilquis) or suicide (Good News Hyder), or embody sheer surreal incoherence and loss of individual identity (the Shakil sisters). (Ahmad 144)

Rushdie shows how the unjust and biased attitude of the society of Pakistan leads to the woes and sufferings of women in Pakistan. Pardeep K. Dey is critical of the biased attitude of the society towards women. He makes the analysis of *Shame* thus:

*Shame* also is a reflection on gender politics. Society sees that Sufia becomes seriously ill, develops brain fever and thus permanently retarded. She develops the brain of a six-year-old at the age of nineteen. Her mental illness act as a metaphor with reference to the pressures of gendering which are very much social and historical. Sufiya's plight is the universal condition which imposes upon many women, particularly of the third world, the possibility of deformation and incapacity. (Ray 103-104)

Rushdie’s *Shame* highlights the fact that the dictatorship of the rulers, immoral acts and rampant corruption leads to the political instability in the nation. It is sure to have an adverse effect on the society of Pakistan. The heroine of the story, Sufia, uncovers the shameful acts of the rulers. She attempts to fight against the repressions and injustices meted out to her. The Pakistani society gets blemished by corruption, and the political leaders resort to illegal practices like the suppression of the men who pose a threat to their political power and thus the political voices of dissent gets silenced by the men in power.

Sufia's resorting to violence and her killing of two hundred and eighteen Turkeys can be seen as a reaction of political oppressions by the rulers on the Pakistani masses. Rushdie describes the how Sufia Zinnobia “had torn off their heads and then reached down into their bodies to draw their guts up their necks with her tiny weaponless hands”(138). Sufia’s frustrations and mental agony resulting in her resorting to violence can be linked to the humiliation of Pakistani masses. Parmeswaran links the sufferings of Sufia with that of Pakistani masses thus:

Sufia can be likened to the spirit of Pakistan at the indignities heaped upon her by her own kith and kin who had expected her to be something other than she was and who turns out to be, because of their actions and attitudes, wild, the Beast within breaking out of her. Her lack of mental development, and her emotional instability could well be Rushdie’s statement on Pakistan. (Parmeswaran 107)

Commenting on the oppression of the rulers Roshin George in an article entitled “Salman Rushdie’s *Shame* History and Fiction,” observes:

Suppression especially sexual suppressions may result in extreme cruelty as is seen in the case of Sufia. Her killing of the four slum boys after raping them signifies this. It stands for the extreme suppression and sexual hypocrisy that was and is the face-mark of
Zia. The macabre element in the ending is also fit for a society, which is totally repressed. It also stands for Rushdie’s wistful thinking for the end of the dictatorship in Pakistan. (Ray 134-135)

According to Mujeebuddin, Rushdie’s *Shame* is a portrayal of women, “who are dynamic and aggressive and rejects the passive roles that women are reduced to playing and sometimes, under the pervasive influence of patriarchal values, even will this subjection upon themselves”(Kuortti144). He further writes that the females in *Shame* are portrayed as passive characters who submit themselves to the patriarchal society and subsequently rejected and are shown in the negative light as the fictional character Arjumabad who was so blinded in love “for her father that she refuses to see even his most glaring omissions is condemned like her mother to a life without love” (Kuortti144).

Rushdie’s *Shame* seems an attempt of his to raise the voice for gender equality in the patriarchal society of Pakistan. In her Research article, entitled “Rushdie’s Attempt at a Feminist Fairytale Reconfiguration” Justyna Deszcz opines that *Shame* is about women’s struggle “against the male establishment of power that becomes acknowledged as paralleling general interrogations of oppression and marginalization…” (Deszcz Justyna in Folklore, 41) According to Aijazz Ahmad: “Sufia's shame comes to refer less and less to herself (her femaleness; her mental retardation) or to her family (which is ashamed of her on counts, femaleness and retardation) and becomes increasingly focused on the world as Sufia finds it; she becomes, almost literally, the conscience of a shameless world…” (Ahmad 1992:146)

The marginalization of women in the Islamic countries like Pakistan is painful. The rulers claim to run the administration according to the dictates of Islam. They portray themselves as ‘agents of God’ but it seems that power gets into their heads. They forget their moral duty to provide fair treatment to all the citizens. Instead of providing the rule based on justice and equality the rulers have become despotic.

Arjumabad Harappa, (modeled on Benzeer Bhutto) daughter of Iskander Harappa is an ambitious girl who has political aspirations. It is because of her birth in the political family that she gets a political environment. She learns the basics of politics as she gets the training because of her birth and growth in a political family. She is well aware of the fact that Pakistani society is a patriarchal one in which men are politically and socially powerful as her father Iskander tells her “‘It’s a man’s world, Arjumabad. Rise above your gender as you grow. There is no place to be a woman in’” (126). Following the advice of her father, she rejects her womanhood and starts practicing the role of man. She gets infatuated to Haraoun Harappa; son of Mir Harappa but Haraoun's marriage gets fixed with Naveed Hyder and Arjumabad becomes ‘Virgin Ironpots’ (126) and afterwards she becomes a forceful lawyer. Arjumabad is in making of a dynamic leader following her father’s legacy. She wants to transform the nation by her progressive and modernist approach.

Rushdie shows how the political men use the women as tools for fulfilling their political motives. Though, Iskander has an illicit affair with Pinki Aurangzeb, but in front of the public he presents himself as a decent man, having his wife Rani Humayun on the podium along with in an election campaign, as he is well aware of the fact that reputation of a man matters a lot in politics and public life. Rani Humayun understands well the political nature of the husband because of a lifelong association with the political leader. She knew “a man embarking on a political career must sooner or later ask his wife to stand beside him on the podium (152).
It can be said that the women themselves are also to blame for their marginalized status. From the conduct of Rani Humayun’s toleration of her husbands’ illicit affair with Pinki, it becomes evident that the women continue to consider men as powerful, who can continue with their unlawful activities. It seems that old culture and traditions hang heavy on women, and they silently accept the patriarchal system. Another question is why the wives of politicians campaign along with their husbands when they are aware of their husband’s illicit relations with other women. The answer is probably that they also become emotionless like politicians whose sole motive is to attain power. They know it well that as legitimate wives of the politicians their status and power will increase manifold and would also enjoy the comforts of life.

Rushdie shows how the politicians are insincere for their wives; they are emotionless fellows and to obtain the power of state or country remains their main concern. Relationships and emotional ties take the back seat. Rani Humayun terms Iskander a man who has no emotional attachment with her and Arjumabadi, their daughter. Their need was only for election campaigns he fed on them but enjoyed the friendship of Pinki on whom he showered his love and attention.

The question arises that if the men, who claim to be representatives of people, are insincere to their life partners, then how can they be sincere and honest for the people. Again the question arises can the masses bestow faith on them. Can one expect these leaders to be emotional for their voters and supporters when they are emotionless for wives and family?

It can be said that claims to provide a system based on justice proves as futile talks of the false politicians, as the women considered as ‘birth givers’ find it difficult to live with dignity and self-respect. How far is it justified silencing the voice of the women when the leaders of democratic countries claim to provide the right of freedom of expression to all irrespective of the gender, class, caste and religion?

Patriarchal society serves its motives by its biased attitude towards women. The society is unconcerned to female issues and their interests. Rushdie through his text Shame shows how the women are marginalized in a patriarchal society as the political and social set-up is gender-biased. Rushdie shows his pain and anguish on the oppressions and suppressions to which women gets subjected to. He portrays the sufferings of women through the fictional women characters like Biliquis Hyder, Rani Harappa, Sufia Zinnobia, Arjumabadi Harappa and Naveed Hyder. Aijaz Ahmad portrays how women lose their identity in the Pakistani society which is full of repressions for women. He writes:

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It can be said that Rushdie has shown women as submissive or complicit with the patriarchal norms and values. Arjumabadi Harappa is an ardent supporter of Iskander Harappa (her father), and she is unwilling to acknowledge that her father is emotionless for her and her mother Rani Harrappa. Rani Harappa has to lead a loveless life as she gets ignored by Iskander, who enjoys with other woman (Pinki). Rani Humayun wants to clear the notion
Arjumabad her daughter has for her father. By showing the ‘badminton shawl’ embroidered by her, she makes it clear to her about the real face of her father. She shows the indecent and immoral acts of a Iskander Harrapa, who represented Pakistan as a political head:

…man lay unclothed…female figures unable to bear the confinement of white shirts… while Isky lounging on his left flank, propped up an elbow, received their ministerations… (192)

Rushdie shows through the above portrayal how the rulers like Iskander gets indulged in immoral acts, extra-marital sexual acts, and they misuse the political power and status for their own merry making and deny the rightful place to their own wives.

To conclude it can be said that it is rather painful that in the modern era when the majority of countries are making all out efforts to give the rightful place to the women the Pakistani political, social and religious leaders hardly make any attempt to do something to raise the status of women. It can be said that the countries which have attained the status of developed countries, is due to the rights and privileges given to the better part of the population (women). Rushdie’s fictional descriptions with regard to the status of women are an attempt of his to awaken the sleeping political leadership and community of the Pakistan. Women should not be considered as a tool of sexual fulfillment or producing children out of them. The progress of the nation is possible only if it allows women to live with dignity and allowed to enjoy rights at par with men. Given the opportunity to work, the women with their intellect and energy can surely work wonders for the nation and the society.

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