

Padma's Plight in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*

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Abstract: *Salman Rashdie is universally highly praised as the most renowned novelist who has significantly focused on the inner world of female characters in his novels. Woman plays an important role in shaping the character and hope of man. She is equally substantial in male dominated society. Her work and fondness remains incomparable. Even then she seems to be intentionally kept away from getting exciting attachment. In this paper an attempt is made to focus on the predicament of woman character Padma. A sincere attempt is also made to point out Salman Rashdie's humanistic approach towards the improvement of women characters and their quest for identity in the hostile society. Rushdie's women characters are the victims of the oppressive traditional system and they suffer from a sense of hostility. Alienation is the chief cause due to unfulfilled love, frustration, rootlessness, disillusionment, betrayal etc. In spite of their devotion and sincerity women characters are intentionally avoided by men in the society. The role of women in life of man remains agreeable. In Midnight's Children Padma is the typical example of the victim of male dominated society. Padma finds that she is being ignored throughout her life, she feels frustrated and dejected. She struggles in her life to create her identity in the vast world.*

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Salman Rushdie's *Midnight Children* is one of the most imaginative novels in English. Salman Rushdie was born on 19th June 1947 in Mumbai India. He was educated in St. Cathedral School. At the age of fourteen he left Mumbai to study at Rugby in England. In 1967 his parents migrated to Pakistan so he had spent some time in Pakistan after the completion of school education. His parents persuaded him to join King's College in Cambridge. He got graduate degree with History as a subject. After graduation he worked as a stage actor and then a copy writer in an advertising company. Meanwhile, he became a seriously working as a writer.

Salman Rushdie's Booker of Booker's winning novel *Midnight's Children* presents feminine sensibility through the medium of various female characters that undergo bitter experiences in their lives. All the female characters are the strong personalities and Padma is one of them. She seems to be a deputy of feminist. She is the central character in the novel as she is the listener of Saleem Sinai's autobiographical narration. She loves Saleem Sinai and does everything for the sake of her love. She does every kind of household works for Saleem like cooking and preparing bed for him. But Saleem seems to be ignoring Padma's affection towards him. He never takes notice of her and does not express a word of gratitude about her and her attachment.

Padma is a victim of this male dominated society. She is most presented in the narrative through her animal physicality. Saleem introduced her as a ‘Padma our plump Padma’..... sulking magnificently, (she can’t read Padma: strong, jolly, a consolation for my last days. But she is a bitch - in - the- manger). (p 24) This exposition does not create a positive image of her, and it is followed by a still more damaging insinuation: “She attempts to cajole me from my desk: Eat, na food is spoiling,’ I remain stubbornly hunched over paper, But what is so precious,’ Padma demands, her right hand slicing the air updownup in exasperation, to need all this writing -shiting?... Padma snorts wrist smacks against forehead, Okay, starve, who cares two pice? Another louder, conclusive snort.... Thick of waist, somewhat hairy of forearm, she flounces” (Rushdie 24). It is noteworthy that for good detail, several derogatory and diminishing details are piled up one after another. She is compared to a bitch, she cajoles snorts; moves her hand up down up and so on. Rushdie suggests a temperamental reluctance on the part of Saleem to allow her anything more than a comic status.

She is not only illiterate and ignorant but is ugly as well. She described as fat, thick and waist. Her simplicity is also held up against her character. Padma’s functions reinforce her as a stereotype. She cooks food for Saleem, makes his bed, sulks when she is ignored and performs all martha’s tasks. Her activities are taken too much for granted, devalued, marginalised. She is considered to be so petty as to deserve no notice or appreciation. Her honest, simple responses deserve to be refined by the man who claims that he knows better. Writing is Saleem’s territory, and she is alien here. She is good at as a passive listener and a receiver for Saleem is the giver. Saleem often mocks her for being silly, and tries to assert his dominance by saying “I attempt to educate her.” (Rushdie 38) Saleem, Rushdie behind him, claims that he knows that India her people, politics, society. How is it that he should be content with describing Padma as an illiterate without also pointing to the socioeconomic conditions which keep women uneducated here? This is case of sexual separatism. Roles, traits qualities, profession, etc are divided along the sexual lines, cooking, washing clothes, raising children are all women’s jobs, and the world out there is regarded as man’s area. Actually these roles and jobs are merely different, not superior or inferior. But since holds power, he elevates his roles to a higher level and degrades woman activities. Enrich Frromen remarks regarding the effect of alienation and rootlessness of human being

The alienation from oneself, from one’s fellow men and from nature, the awareness that life runs out of one’s hand like sand and that the one will die without having lived that live one’s midst that plenty and joyless. (Zen 86)

Rushdie in his novel has delineated quite a negative mystique which is built around Padma's desire for Saleem. Saleem the de-sexed man cannot bring any physical fulfilment, but then he, in his consciousness of his barrenness, reduces Padma to mere bundle of sexual urges. Saleem highlights Padma's suggestive sexual reference as though she was vulgar or a nympho-maniac. Saleem takes such a long time to admit to her that he must be physically fit. It is very reductive of Saleem to see her only as a bitch is heat. He should be able to appreciate the sentiment behind her administering of the magic aphrodisiac herbs, all for her lover, but he feels outraged at such a waste of time. He cannot see the solicitude underlying Padma's venture, and it is dismissed as a manifestation of her heat. She is seldom appreciated. A woman even at her best is not trusted. On the condition of women, Sheila Mcleod in an article entitled "The Passion to be Masculine" observes:

Women's work has long been downgraded and devaluated when compared to man's work, male muscular strength has been prized above the female capacity for physical endurance, men have been the owners of wealth and property, the wielders of authority, the holders of power, the achievers, the doers, the go-getters, while women have been barred from such apparently desirable positions or behaviours. (Mcleod 18).

Padma's needs are emotional and empathic and it is perverse of Saleem to suggest that she needs only sex. The spontaneous manner in which she demands to be his bride suggests that sex is not everything to her. In fact, she would be happy if Saleem could give her some good, loving moments, moments of sympathy and nearness, of caring and touch. But the "city boy" has no time for this stupid village girl. Her only sin is that she is wholly, soulfully in love with him and love has become her trap. For a traditional Hindu woman, the decision to stay with a barren, Muslim widower is simply radical. It is a testimony to her deep love for him. Given the possibility that Saleem is disintegrating and dying, the decision is overwhelming because of its courageous, decisive enormity. She seems to have sold out all her future for the sake of her love. Still, she is a mere utility object. Saleem desires warmth, care, food, etc., and she is supposed to fulfil all his needs. But in return, she is treated as a bad liability by him, Saleem has no time to sit and reflect as to whether he is being just to her. It is difficult to justify his heartless, superficial compliments to her. "I don't blame Padma," when all along he is very prone to insinuating gratuitous comparisons, all to the disadvantage of Padma. Saleem cannot forgive Padma's absences.

Saleem needs Padma and therefore takes her presence for granted, but then being a male he detests to acknowledge his need. This is double ingratitude. He diminishes her and exploits her, and still expects her

to be grateful to him. It is highly creditable of this woman that she loves him and is ready to accept his inadequacies without condescension. It is to be remembered that unlike Saleem whose adventures have included visiting prostitutes and amusing incestuous desires, Padma has solid moral and ethical values. Why then should she be treated with so much contempt? What has she done to merit persistent equation with dung? Why is she debunked as superstitious? Why are her sincere, sentimental speeches mimicked into a joke? What, on the other hand, is so special about Saleem that he should dismiss her affectionate attendant at his feet as a distraction or nuisance?

Although Padma is Saleem's constant companion and audience, interlocutor and critic, the moments of crucial decisions or intensity in the narration's perspective simply leave her out. The two most crucial narration moments - his reluctance to come out with the emergency truths in chapter 29 - do not include Padma. The strategy used at these intense moments is man's deep agony. Therefore, Padma too cannot sympathize with Saleem. One recalls how Grass's *The Tin Drum*, a major influence on *Midnight's Children*, begins by introducing Bruno, Oskar's keeper in the narrational perspective, and how much dignity Oskar awards to him by asking him to do a whole chapter of the narrative. Padma, by contrast, is consistently diminished. It is safe to assume that Saleem's narrative like Saleem, believes that it can easily do without her: "Padma must take a back seat."

Padma's portrait is composed more of gaps and absences than of presences. Her absences relate to such crucial matters as her background, her past, her family, and her social contexts. She seems to be characterized only as a footnote to Saleem the narrator, and is shown to have only a vacuum by way of her human contexts. She is given no independent, contingent identity, her past, her family, her story, all are crashed. She is negated when Saleem discusses politics or history. Her story is discarded like dung. Saleem ignores her, but we cannot and we should not. Saleem, in fact, goes three generations back to start his story and claims that in order to know him, we have to swallow a multitude of lives; but he does not feel any need to perspectives Padma in time or space at all.

In male dominant ideologies need to recompense man's actual degradation and exploitation of woman by doling out to her some fantasy, mystified space in which she is worshipped as a goddess. This mystified space is the view of her sex. This unreal space is a device to legitimize her actual utilization day in, day

out. Padma's description as the lotus-goddess is no compliment to her, though she may think it is, because she is a willing dupe of the sexist politics of India. She is Saleem's despised other, usable, exploitable, disposable commodity. She is not only a slave but also a perfect fool. It is disturbing to see Saleem making so much of his victimization and tragedy but simply marginalizing the tragedy that is Padma's. Since women constitute a half of India, Padma's tragedy finds its echo in this other India's tragedy. Padma's tragedy is no less terrifying than Saleem's but the narrative being phallogocentric, her tragedy is wholly, though arbitrarily, appropriated by that of Midnight's son. As V. P. Rathi in an article entitled, "Delineation of Brave Woman in "The Story in The Painting" An Extract from *Kafala's Essentials* rightly observes:

So it is believed that in the Indian culture those women essentially need man's support for their smooth life. Traditionally women have to do all the familial duties without any single complaint. Even today it is common that women are confined to the four walls of the house and are without any freedom to acquire education. In society they are often treated as objects or show dolls with no identity. (Rathi 266)

The bold argument of Rushdie is clearly revealed through the character Padma in his novel. Padma is acquiescent to male domination and is eager to change her name from Padma Mongril to Naseem Sinai. She is one of amongst those women who are men's women. She has internalised men's random characterization of women. Behaves more like how men would expect her to behave than how she as woman can or should. Even as it is, she is wished-for as a pathetic victim who does not exist as a free, self-willing actor, and only as her master's voice, without knowing it. Thus the conditions and problems of Padma are described vividly in the novel.

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