

# ‘CASTING OFF THE SHELL’: FEMALE EMPOWERMENT IN SALMAN RUSHDIE’S *Shame*.

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**ABSTRACT:** *Gender inequality and the need for women empowerment had become one of the major issues stressed globally at recent times. When addressing human rights and development, women empowerment also occupies a procedural concern with its credible approaches and goals. Many of the postmodern writers had emphasized the importance of female equality and women empowerment in their works. Salman Rushdie, a well-known writer of magical realism and historical fiction had synchronized the concept of women empowerment in many of his works. In one of his most popular work Shame he illustrates and represents women as over-empowering female and as counterproductive to the feminist project. Though the two concepts are certainly not mutually exclusive, Rushdie through his stylistic endeavors provides ways for viewing the marginalized and subaltern. The protagonist Sufia who resist the conventional patriarchal expectations placed upon her fails to display positive feminist qualities which ironically help us to suspect the motives of Rushdie’s supposedly ‘empowered females’ This research paper tends to analyze Rushdie’s women characters in the novel who are in reality weak and secondary to men but presented as if they are dominative and strengthened.*

**Key words:** *Equality, Gender, Marginalized, Patriarchal.*

**Introduction:** Rushdie’s novel usually encompasses binaries of occidental and oriental influences. The conflicts with culture, gender discrimination, history mingled with fantasy, satire on politics are some of the major issues which can be analyzed in his works. The repeatedly aroused criticism on Rushdie handling of controversial subject matters and the tragic international intrigue of fatwa sparked Salman Rushdie with international publicity. *Shame* is one of the earlier works which focuses on the history of Pakistan foreshadowing its political reception. Many of the critic heralds it as a feminist text but the irony is that the female characters in the novel get subjugated through a male narration which can be sagaciously explored. Rushdie intending to write ‘her-story’ instead of ‘his-story’ conventionally establishes a notion of connecting the marginalized and centralized. Though the aim of the novel accomplishes to stress for the privilege and the empowerment of women, when placed in a feminist discourse it challenges the construction of women’s achievements through a male hand. The women characters in the novel is interpreted as emblematic signification of Pakistan while the two major male characters Raza Hyder and Iskander Harappa, are construed as the satiric manifestations of historical rulers ‘General Zia-ul-Haq’ and ‘Zufikar ali Bhutto.’

The imprisonment of the three female characters by their father Mr. Shakil in a mansion and the treatment of subjugation denouncing their potential desire behind the walls represents the patriarchal system which denies the basic individual right of a woman. The so called mansion symbolizes a ‘cage’ in which the social world of the female characters revolves around. Repression becomes the only tool of female subjugation discerned as the patriarchal control in the novel. Repression through moral and theological restraints reveals the dark history of social injustice made on women throughout ages.

Repression is a seamless garment; a society which is authoritarian in social and sexual codes, which crushes its women beneath the intolerable burdens of honour and propriety, breeds repression of other kinds as well (S 173).

Through the emblematic reading of the female characters Chhunni, Munnee, and Bunny, their representation into three major schisms as Indian, Pakistani, and English culture can easily be identified. Their women caretakers representing the tripartite religious division in India as Hindus, Christians, and Muslims draws religious allegory into the text. Their house which metaphorically alludes to India shows the influence of the native sectors and British. Their invention of private language within themselves represents the diversity of language within the country. Similarly their father Shakil’s death leaving them debt ridden represents the end of British rule which created instability in Indian economy. The three sisters signing away their fortune and their fertile land to get ridden of their debts, purely emphasize India’s splintered cultural groups which recede from the world and feed itself by pawning its treasures. Rushdie implementing geographical and political congruence through his female characters brings a new identity of looking at his women characters.

Rushdie naming his fictional country as ‘Peccavistan’ but drawing his materials from real ‘Pakistan’ proves his ability in bringing a full-fledged magical realistic text. His characterization of the three daughters of Shakil embodies the cruelty of demonization women receive in the male dominated society. The pregnancy of one of the three sisters and the other two sister’s effort to hide the shame proves the fear of how women’s sexuality is valued by the socio-political powers. Further the birth of the male protagonist Omar and the confusion retain in sharing the son among the three mothers purely satirizes women’s emotions and their psychological complex towards male children.

*Shame* in the name of questioning the patriarchal system ironically satirizes the matriarchal construct. The women's quest for selfhood ends up in an epiphany of multiple selves giving no identity for the true self. Sufia, the female protagonist is treated as an idiot born out of shame for the parents who expected a male child. Her search for both identity and sexuality represents a dual quality of beauty and beast which emphasizes her domesticated state. Though born rich as a daughter of the national leader Raza Hyder, Sufia is deprived even to enjoy her basic freedom and exempted from rejoicing any form of patronage. Her life starts with a demeaned treatment by others as a retarded girl and as a girl unconscious of her own biology and sex. The environment in which she grows treats her as an icon of shame, significantly canonizing the image of enslaved woman in her.

Similarly, Omar who comes as doctor to give ailments to Sufia's physical health at last subjugate her through marrying her. His intention on marrying her in spite of her younger age proves his cruelty of gaining control over her shame. Thus the challenging situation kindled her shame into deadly rage and resulted in deaths and torments on her own community. Samir Dayal when discussing about the gender issues in *Shame* notes the blurring lines between the treatment of feminine and masculine. He states: "Men and women in the Third world invariably seem condemned to a stereotypically feudal, patriarchal, or neocolonialist social structure in which women are subordinated" (48).

Rushdie calls Omar as his 'peripheral hero' because though the novel revolves around Sufiya Zinobia, her shame made her passive and least important to be a central character. Thus Rushdie had followed the universal grammar of not historicizing a woman, who had become a symbol of shame. Sufiya embodies shame which had imposed on her, hence the contrary and dependent states of opaqueness and accuracy shows an incredible importance in the core aspect of the novel. Rushdie as a postcolonial writer represent the post-colonial struggles that his male characters had undergone and makes his female characters obey the patriarchal norms. John McLeod defines the term patriarchy as a system "...which invest power in men and marginalize women" (173).

Even in the case of Sufiya's mother Bilquis's marriage with Raza, the patriarchal system forced her into a condition of sharing her hidden secrets in order to receive the acceptance from her husband's extended family. But soon after the marriage what happened was the loss of her identity and her ultimate surrender to the social system. Bilquis was replaced with a new identity and was made to pretend to be happy with her new identity as Raza's wife. She found herself to be estranged in her new environment which took her 'self' identity. silenced by the in-law mob . . . and thus acquired the triple reputation of sweet innocent child, doormat and fool . . . but she was also admired, grudgingly, because the family had a high opinion of Raza, the woman admitted that he was a good man who did not beat his wife (S 75-76).

Even the story of Bilquis was reshaped by other characters who insisted upon a falsely created narrative. Observing this Hume points to an extremely effective moment when the narrator explains that the creation of other's stories affects his narration.

Well, well, I mustn't forget I'm only telling a fairy-story. My dictator will be toppled by goblinish, faey means. 'Makes it pretty easy for you,' is the obvious criticism; and I agree, I agree. But add, even if it does sound a little peevish: 'You try and get rid of a dictator some time.' (S 257)

The narrator indirectly defends his storytelling method and also his author, who holds the dictatorship in the plot. Another instance on women suppression is known through the tale of Rani Harappa with her husband Iskander Harappa, the deposed leader. Rani uncovers the reality of the feudal system and reveals the part of her husband's political life colored by arrogance, corruption and social injustice. The tale of Iskander, narrated by his wife shows how Rani was made passive not to interfere in her husband's affairs in spite of his corrupted living. In such male-centered society her voice becomes passive and the only mode she chose to expresses her individuality is through her embroidery work. The situations in such society make her accustomed only to listen to her men and not to argue or narrate.

Rani's embroidery works on twelve shawls slowly reveals her husband's betrayal to the nation as well as to her as a loyal husband. Similarly her daughter Arjumand Harappa takes a prominent role in the public world by confronting against the way of Raza Hyder's policy. Arjumand in order to encounter the patriarchal rule and to register a place in history differentiated herself from the women of main stream. But the irony is that she takes her father as her ideal example and follows the path of her archetypal father who symbolizes patriarchal dominance, political corruption and autocracy.

Rushdie presents Omar's marriage with Sufiya as a communion between shamelessness and shame. His men forbid themselves to feel shame as that would destroy their pride, but his women take the unfelt shame of their men on themselves. Sufiya also represents such effort to imagine a different outcome for women who is victimized in the male dominated society. Rushdie's ends his narrative in an attic feministic rage of Sufiya slaying her husband which further ironically questions the loss of her identity. Rushdie's novel finally proves that his primary interest does not lie in portraying women as successful power players but as ultimately failed exoticized female characters and fetishized bodies. Rushdie's women represent the overall wives in the real world who stay with their husbands even after their physical abuse in order to preserve the family pride. They are trained in such a way that the betrayal of the family loyalty would result in shame upon themselves and their families. Thus the overall scrutinized idea proves that Rushdie in order to hide the post-colonial struggles of the homeless male emigrant remains ambivalent to the plight of female characters in this novel.

## ABBREVIATION

S- SHAME

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