

## Concept of Gender in Salman Rushdie's *Shame*

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### **Abstract**

Gender is a notable concept which becomes popular in the twentieth century. It is socially constructed and it divides humans into male and female. It is a system which controls our lives in the society. It is everywhere such as sleeping, eating, watching TV, shopping or reading. We could not get a passport without the birth certificate which records our gender. Thus every human body is assigned a place in a binary structure of gender in the modern society. In this research paper, I will try to find out the gender elements in Salman Rushdie's *Shame*. I will focus on the characters of this novel and will try to locate the paragraphs where Rushdie has use the Gender element.

**Keywords-** Gender Construct, Patriarchy, Stereotype, Culture, Repression, Sexuality

### **Introduction**

All cultures have literature. It consists of the various genres such as poetry, play, stories and fiction. All literature reflects the practices, and aesthetic values of the culture within which it is produced and read. Literature plays an important role in the life and death, including heroism, courtship and marriage. For this reason, literature reflects upon the events, emotions, and elements that make up human lives. As basic elements of life, sex and gender play a crucial role in all literature.

Gender is the character identification in the society. It has evolved from male and female psychological aspects. It allows individuals to function within social context. Gender is not about women but about the relation between men and women. It is an approach that focuses on women and

men and not on isolation. Gender is one of the most important elements of gender enquiry in feminist criticism. N. Krishnaswamy argues in his work *Contemporary Literary Theory*:

Feminism (of late called 'womanism') is a serious attempt to formulate the issues and find solutions to gender problems. It was started by Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* (1949) and gained momentum in the 1960s. (74)

She brought issues of sex and gender into intellectual consideration. *The Second Sex* has established Beauvoir as a central feminist voice. It is often regarded as a masterpiece work of feminist philosophy and the starting point of second-wave feminism. Valerie Bryson depicts in *Feminist Political Theory*:

In her celebrated phrase 'One is not born but rather becomes a woman' (*Second Sex*: 297), and her discussion of the ways in which girls are forced into certain paths and denied expression of their full humanity led her to an examination of the experiences of girls and women that included discussion of hitherto taboo areas of female life such as menstruation and sexuality, which she discussed with a frankness unprecedented in a serious academic work. (130-131)

According to Beauvoir, in all works of human life the male is the norm and women are forced to live according to the standard set by the male, and also the first step to claim identity is to declare that I am a woman. That is the first step to assert woman's identity so that mean at that time women were radically ashamed by existence as a woman. So at this point she said that if you want to assert your identity 'you are a woman'. So that is the only way woman must assert her identity that declared that she is a woman, and so she said that woman is not actually born as woman but rather made as woman. So that means woman is not born as a woman but she was made by social structure.

Gender is usually confused with sex. Kate Millet is an important figure in American feminism. Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics* (1970) is an important work in feminism. She makes a distinction between 'sex' and 'gender'. In *Contemporary Literary Theory*, N. Krishnaswamy argues:

'Sex' is determined biologically where as 'gender' is culturally/ socially/ psychologically/ constructed through sex-role stereotyping and historical condition. Millet argues that women as much as men are responsible in perpetuating the sex-role images, she analyses the repressive role of the male and the submissive role of the female. (75-76)

Thus sex is biological category. It is treated by biology and physical anatomy. So that means sex refer to how male bodies are different from female bodies. Gender is social construct. Certain roles are assigning to women by the society and so thus certain qualities are manly or masculine and certain other qualities are described as feminine or womanly. So this is something constructed by the

society. To say an act of masculine or feminine is something related to perception of society. Kate Millett was against patriarchy. In *Sexual Politics*, she attacked on male writers such as D.H. Lawrence, Henry Miller, and Norman Mailer. N. Krishnaswamy says:

Kate Millet in her *Sexual Politics* has analysed and exposed the oppressive representation of sexuality found in ‘male fiction’ (androtxts), particularly in the novels of D.H. Lawrence, Henry Miller, Norman Mailer and Jean Genette; she has deliberately presented the female reader’s view and made a powerful critique of patriarchal culture. (78-79)

So she charged with these patriarchal portrayals of women characters in their novels. So that means sexuality has a politics and that politics they had neglected, and these writers makes certain models for female characters with their works. So thus they are responsible for stereotypes for women characters. Kate Millet is a radical feminist. Radical feminists are against patriarchy. Judith Worell argues in *Encyclopaedia of Women and Gender*:

Radical feminism, which was born during the “new” feminist movement of the 1960s, identifies women’s oppression as the most fundamental and pervasive form of oppression and articulates how patriarchal control over women’s bodies has dominated every area of life including paid employment, housework, intimate partnerships, violence, and mothering.” (472)

Gender discusses the element of patriarchy, sexuality, identity, difference, stereotypes, and heterosexuality. Patriarchy is an important concept in gender studies. Gender studies flourished in European society. Thus western society is basically patriarchal society. Even the foundation of Western philosophy and the western metaphysics articulated patriarchal ideas. For example, Aristotle perhaps was the founder of the western philosophy. He declared that ‘the female is female by virtue of a certain lack of qualities’. So he said that women are made of by the virtue of certain lack of qualities. So according to him women have fewer teeth than men. Another statement made by Thomas Aquinas that woman is ‘imperfect men’. The most radical philosopher who is actually the turning point of all literary theories is Friedrich Nietzsche. He argued that woman is the source of all folly and unreason, the siren figure that lures the male philosopher out of his appointed truth seeking path and that ‘women is god’s second mistake’.

Thus the history of western philosophy was a history of patriarchal. So they were not ready to give dignity to woman. They represents woman as weaker than man. The term patriarchy means rule by the male over others such men, all women and children. However, since the early twentieth century, feminist writers have used the concept to refer to the social system of masculine domination over women. “Patriarchy has been a fundamentally important concept in gender studies, leading to the

development of a number of theories that aim to identify the bases of women's subordination to men." (93)

Jane Pilcher has argued in his book *Fifty Key Concepts in Gender Studies*: "Patriarchy is a central concept of radical feminist. "In 'radical feminist' analyses patriarchy is regarded as the primary and fundamental social division in society." (93)

Thus Patriarchy is a historical, social, cultural, and political institutionalization of male power that results in the domination, subordination, and marginalization of women.

Sexuality is another important aspect in gender studies. Sexuality works in western society. Anny Cranny- Francis depicts in his work *Gender Studies* "Female sexuality is marked as naturally masochistic, narcissistic and passive; male sexuality is inscribed as naturally aggressive, sadistic and active." (7) Judith Butler is a post structural feminist. She argues that gender supports the category of sex by means of cultural imperatives. Anne Crann Francis says in *Gender Studies*:

She argues that gender is the process of embodiment which results from the repeated performance of acts of gendering, and that this debate over which comes first, gender or sex, nature or culture, is a red herring. (4)

Butler introduces the concept of 'performative'. Imelda Wheleham argues in *Fifty Key Concepts in Gender Studies*, "Judith Butler's theorisation about gender introduces this notion of performativity – the idea that gender is involuntarily 'performed' within the dominant discourses of heteroreality, which only deliberately subversive performances like drag can successfully undermine." (58) Judith Butler, a post structural feminist, argues that "gender supports the category of sex by means of cultural imperatives such as heterosexuality. It is naturalized and institutionalized heterosexuality that regulates gender as a binary relation through differentiating male from female by means of practices associated with heterosexual desire."

Salman Rushdie is one of the significant postcolonial writers in English literature. He is famous for his masterpiece novels including *Midnight's Children*, *Shame*, *the Satanic Verses*, *The Moor's Last Sign* and *Imaginary Homelands*. In *Shame*, Salman Rushdie is concerned to highlight the element of gender in the Pakistani society. In it Rushdie describes the contemporary political situation as well as the history of Pakistan. He represents the woman of the Islamic Pakistan society and portrayed the political condition of Pakistan after partition of India. Salman Rushdie describes *Shame* as a fairytale, "Fortunately, however, I am only telling a sort of modern fairytale, so that's all right; nobody need get upset, or take anything I say too seriously. No drastic action need be taken, either." (70)

Fairytale is a form of folk literature. It is written in narrative style in prose, and fiction. David Mikics remarks in his book *A New Hand Book of Literary Terms*: "The fairy tale is a specific literary

form, frequently featuring magical transformations, giants and dwarves, young women suffering cruel captivity or placed under spells, and heroic rituals of initiation.” (116) this suggests that he wants to depict the reality of women’s condition in the patriarchal society by employing a fairytale.

Salman Rushdie further says :

Once upon a time there were two families, their destinies inseparable even by death. I had thought, before I began, that what I had on my hands was an almost excessively masculine tale, a saga of sexual rivalry, ambition, power, patronage, betrayal, death, revenge... (173)

Thus, *Shame* depicts the fate and fortune of two families Raza Hyder a celebrated general in defence and Iskander Harappa a millionaire-a play boy-turned politician. Rushdie bases these characters on real life Pakistani leaders: former president Zia-Ul –Haq and former Prime Minister Zuifikar Ali Bhutto. Apart from these two families, there is another Shakil family. Omar Khayyam Shakil was born as a common son of Munny, Bunny and chunni, married Sufiya Zinobia, the daughter of Raja Hyder, an army officer who after a coup becomes the president of the country.

Iskander Harappa, the dethroned prime minister, was hanged. All political parties were banned, judiciary was subverted and elections were cancelled. Democracy was paralysed in the grip of martial law. Omar takes Raza Hyder and his wife Bilquis to Nishpur in burkhas. The novel ends with the revenge taken by Omar Khayyam and his three mothers for the death of their second son Babar, who was killed by General Raja Hyder for being a revolutionary poet. Omar Khayyam also is killed in the hands of his wife Sufiya.

The Shakil family and Bariamma’s family has not only some similarity but also some differences. Uma Parameswaran argued in *Salman Rushdie’s Early Fiction*: “both are patterned on a form of traditional autocracy but the contrasts are gendered and through this gendering, Rushdie shows his appreciation of women’s strengths. The first is dominated by a patriarch and the second ‘s a matriarch.” (116)

In the beginning of the novel, the Shskil Sisters faced the problem of patriarchy. They are closed in the big house by their father Mr, Shakil.

The three girls had been kept inside that labyrinthine mansion until his dying day; virtually uneducated, they were imprisoned in the zenana wing where they amused each other by inventing private languages and fantasizing about what a man might look like...(13)

The three girls have no freedom to go out form the house. They are uneducated. They have not seen a man. The house becomes a prisoner for them. They are suffering. They cursed their father when he was dying. His eldest daughter asked his father the only question: ‘we are going to be very

rich now, is that not so?' The Shakil Sisters has produced two children whose father is not known. The name of the first child is Omar Khayyam and the other is Babar Shakil. Omar Khayyam is the hero of the novel. He is a physician.

Raza Hyder marries Bilquis. He is the symbol of power and money. He always desires to have a male child first. Thus, when Bilquis become pregnant her husband Raza Hyder said, "He's coming! 'whoosh!'... 'Voom, wife! Here he comes!' And he shouted, promising to accomplish a great victory in honour of his forthcoming son" (78) Unfortunately, Bilquis delivered a dead son and disappointed her husband's expectation. When she became pregnant for the second time, she told her husband, "Raz, he's coming back, the little angel just you wait and see" (88). Breaking the tradition, Bilquis gave birth to a daughter. She said, "Is that all, my God? So much huffery and puffery to push out only this mouse" (89). She named her daughter Sufia Zinobia. Expectation of Raza Hyder and Bilquis to get a son expresses the male oriented society. Their ill treatment of Sufiya, for being a girl, shows gender difference in the oppressed' not only men, but also by women.

Catherine Cundy argues in his work *Salman Rushdie*:

The fascination/obsession with the domestic and sexual power of women which is always present in Rushdie work is more evident in *Shame* than anywhere else. The text's declared project to voice the silence stories of Pakistan's oppressed women is often admired by critics without consideration of the way it is undercut by the representation of the women themselves. (52)

Thus, both Raza Hyder and his wife emphasize the importance of a male child over the female child in the family. Bilquis represents her daughter as a mouse. She does not give a respect to her female child.

After the declaration of the 'Martial Law' and imprisonment of the Chief Minister Gichki, Raza becomes the 'chief administrator' of the region. He is supported by Maulana Dawood who is a religious fanatic. Dawood gives him all the suggestion that he needs. Salman Rushdie satirizes both of them. Rushdie says that the politician and religious people has misled and cheated the common and innocent people in the country in the name of God and religion. They make the life of common people hell.

Women protested against God for their rights. But Maulana Dawood, a religious fanatic, was not happy for their protest. He is against to women's right. He advises to Raza Hyder to stop this protest:

Two years after the death of Iskander Harappa the women of the country began marching against God. These processions were tricky things, Raza decided, they needed careful handling. So he trod cautiously, even though Maulana Dawood

screamed in his ear that he was a weakling, he should strip the whores naked and hang them from all available trees. But Raza was circumspect; he told the police to avoid hitting the ladies on the breasts when they broke up the demonstrations. (249)

Raza Hyder has arrested Noor Begum who was the leader of the organiser. He charged on her for exporting women and children. The narrator says:

... This Noor Begum was a notorious character with a history of exporting women and children to the harems of Arab princes. Only now did he send his men off to seize her, because nobody could object to such an arrest... (249)

This suggests the bad condition of women in the society where political leaders and religious preacher are against the welfare of women situation.

Iskander Harappa is another political leader but he has also his own weakness for women and power. He is involved in sensual activities and political tricks. Salman Rushdie has used shawl as an allegory to disclose the reality of Iskander Harappa. Iskander has exploited his wife and lover Pinkie Aurangzeb. Rani Harappa, wife of Iskander, is rejected by her husband. She is not happy with Iskander because he has illegal relationship with Pinkie Aurangzeb. Rani told her daughter about the nature of her husband. She says: "he was international rough and bastard number one." (108)

She has woven eighteen shawls. In these shawls she has depicted evil and corrupt nature of Iskander Harappa. She is aware of Iskander Harappa's all activities. She says:

...I knew him, he hid nothing from me, I saw the white girls in the village swell and pop, I knew about the small but regular donations he sent them, Harappa children must not starve, and after he fell they came to me. (192)

She further discloses his illegal relationship with other women. She says:

... the great man lay unclothed, while all about him the pink-skinned concubines cavorted, their sporting outfits falling lightly from their bodies; ... the female figures seemed unable to bear the confinements of white shirts, brassieres, gymshoes, they flung them off, while Isky lounging on his left flank, propped up on an elbow, received their ministrations.(192)

This suggests the evil activities of the political leader who exploits the women in the society in Pakistan. Iskander has done good things for her daughter. Arjumand Harappa is a worshipper of her father Iskander. He provides better education and environment for her development. He always motivates her. He states her, "it's a man's world, Arjumand. Rise above your gender as you grow. This is no place to be a woman in. (126)"

She rejects her gender. The narrator says, " Loathing her sex, Arjuman went to great lengths to disguise her looks; she cut her hair short, wore no cosmetics or perfume, dressed in her father's old

shirts and biggest trousers she could find, developed a stooped and slouching insistently her blossoming boy out shore her disguise.” (156)

Arjumand helps her father in politics. She accompanied him on his diplomatic rounds. She is well educated and professional. She is qualified in law. Salman Rushdie has portrayed her positively. She becomes the good leader for people. She “became active in the green revolution, threw zamindars out of their palaces, opened dungeons, led raids on the homes of film stars and slit open their mattresses with a long two-edged knife, laughed as the black money poured out from between the pocketed springs.” (182)

She punished the enemies of the state. She hates her father when she comes to know his illegal relationship. She scolds her father for his illegal relationship with women. The narrator remarks: “Polygamist, she punched his leg, ‘what an old fashion backward type at heart! It’s just marriage and concubines you want. Modern man, my foot. (183)”

Naveed Hyder is another female character in the novel. She is the wife of Captain Talvar Ulhaq. She is the mother of fourteen children. He treats her wife as a sexual object. For him Naveed is a child producing machine. The narrator depicts in the novel:

Her husband came to her once a year and ordered her to get ready, because it was time to plant the seed, until she felt like a vegetable patch whose naturally fertile soil was being worn out hope for women in the word, because whether you were respectable or not the men got your anyway, no matter how hard you tried to be the most proper of ladies the men would come and stuff you fu of alien unwanted life (206).

This suggests the exploitation of women on the name of marriage. Men do not care the health of women for their sexual desires. Naveed Hyder had one suicide due to her over pregnancy. The narrator depicts:

That night Begum Talvar Ulhaq, the former Good News Hyder, was found in her bedroom at the Hyder residence, hanged by the neck, dead. On the floor beneath her angling feet lay the broken rope of her first attempt, snapped by the enormous weight of her pregnancy (228).

Omar Khayyam is the hero of the novel. He is the husband of Sufia Zinobia. He is a medical practitioner. He is thirty one year senior to Sufiya. He is a voyeur boy. He also rejects her wife. He does not sleep with Sufiya Zinobia. He has illegal relationship with Shahbanou. Shahbanou is the caretaker and maid-servant of Sufiya Zinobia. The narrator says, “After that she came to him every night, except during her times of the month and the days of fertility...” (212).

Shahbanou becomes pregnant and dismissed from service. She is rejected by patriarchal society. Omar's wife hates him for his sexual relationship with her maid-servant. At last Omar Khayyam feels guilty and confesses his crime:

'I can confess to many things. Fleeing-from-roots, obesity, drunkenness, hypnosis. Getting girls in the family way, not sleeping with my wife, too-many-pine-kernels, peeping-tommery as a boy. Sexual obsession with under-age brain-damaged female, resultant failure to avenge my brother's death. I didn't know him. It is difficult to commit such acts on behalf of strangers. I confess to making strangers of my kin.'  
(283)

Sufiya Zinobia is unwanted child of her parents. She is pure and innocent. Rushdie calls her "wrong miracle" and her mother regards her as a "mouse". Bilquis says, "He wanted a hero of a son; I gave him an idiot female instead...that bird brain, that mouse! I must accept it: she is my shame" (109). Bilquis loves very much to her younger daughter Naveed and rejected to Sufiya. The narrator says, "Bilquis poured all her affection over younger daughter Naveed... while Sufiya Zinobia...remained as dry as the desert" (121). This suggests that Bilquis has made a gender difference between her daughters.

Sufiya is suffered by brain fever. She "contracted a case of brain fever that turned her into an idiot" (100). She turned into supernatural eminent. The narrator remarks, "Lurking inside Sufiya Zinobia Shakil there was a Beast. We have already seen something of growth of his unspeakable monster..." (197). She hates her husband because her husband does not spend his night with her. The narrator remarks, "There is a thing that women do at night with husbands. She does not do it, Shahbanou does it for her. I hate fish..." (215) Sufiya fills her sexual desires with four men. After completing her sexual desire she has killed them. The narrator says:

Down she lies...Four husbands come and go. Four of them in an out, and then her hands reach for the first boy's neck. The others stand still and wait their turn. And heads hurled high, sinking into the scattered clouds nobody saw them fall. She rise, goes home. And sleep; the Beast subsides." (219)

She is responsible for the destruction of her father's rule. She brings destruction and death by turning into supernatural element. She also killed her husband at the end of the novel. The other main characters in the novel symbolises the innocent people of Pakistan. Bilquis and Rani Harappa are the wives of tyrants. Both are rejected by their husband. Haroun Harappa is the follower of Iskander. Salman Rushdie depicts the real condition in the society of the Pakistan. He criticizes on the corruption, illegal relationship of the leaders who are responsible for this condition. The narrator says:

lies, loose living, disrespect for one's elders, failure to love one's national flag, incorrect voting at elections, over-eating, extramarital sex, autobiographical novels, cheating at cards, maltreatment of women folk, examination failures, smuggling, throwing one's wicket away at crucial point of a Test Match: and are done shamelessly. Then what happens to all that unfelt shame? (122)

The narrator further remarks the corruption in the society:

Shameful things are done: lies, loose living, disrespect for one's elders, failure to love one's nation flag, incorrect voting at elections, over-eating, extramarital sex, autobiographical novels, cheating at cards, maltreatment of women folk, examination failure, smuggling, throwing one's wicket away at a crucial point of a Test Match: and they are done shamelessly. (122)

### Conclusion

In conclusion it can be said that Rushdie has depicted the reality of Pakistani society by adopting the element of gender. He discloses that Pakistani society is male oriented, where political leaders exploited the women as well as common and innocent people by their power. They reject their wives with their daughters. They are not ready to develop the right and dignity of women in the society. Rushdie criticised on the over population of the society.

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