

Gender Bias in Salman Rushdie and Mahasweta Devi's Novels

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Abstract: Comparative literature deals with the literature of two or more different linguistic, cultural or nation groups. "Shame" is Salman Rushdie's third novel, published in 1983. Like most of Rushdie's work, this book was written in the style of magic realism. The central theme of the novel is that violence is born out of shame. The concepts of shame and shamelessness are explored through all of the characters. "Shame" discusses heritage, authenticity, truth, and, of course, shame and shamelessness, as well as the impact of all these themes on an individual, the protagonist Omar Khayyám. Mahasweta Devi is one of the most popular contemporary writers of Bengali literature. She speaks about the exploitation of womanhood in the hands of male-chauvinism. Another major aspect that she deals is on the stupid rituals followed by the people which also sometimes draw back from their progress and which is a major factor for women to lose their identity. "Till Death Do Us Part" is one of the fictional works of Mahasweta Devi. It is a volume of five short stories spanning over three decades of writing, showing an unusual tenderness on the side of the author who is wildly known for her satiric prose and biting indictment of social inequalities. In this manuscript, three of her works are discussed. These fictions deal with the stories of elderly women and the men in their lives: husbands, lovers, sons and friends. These touching tales, with their humor, delicacy and warmth, are each centered on a woman character.

Keywords: Gender bias, Womanhood, exploitation, men, women

I. Introduction

Comparative literature deals with the literature of two or more different linguistic, cultural or nation groups. While comparative literature is most frequently practiced with works of different languages, it may also be performed on works of the same language if the works originate from different nations or cultures among which that language is spoken. Also included in the range of inquiry are comparisons of different types of art; for example, a relationship of film to literature. Comparative literature is an interdisciplinary field whose practitioners study literature across national borders, across time periods, across languages, across genres, across boundaries between literature and the other arts (music, painting, dance, film, etc.), across disciplines (literature and psychology, philosophy, science, history, architecture, sociology, politics, etc.). Defined most broadly, comparative literature is the study of "literature without borders." What scholars in Comparative literature share is a desire to study literature beyond national boundaries and an interest in languages so that they can read foreign texts in their original form. Many researchers also share the desire to integrate literary experience with other cultural phenomena such as historical change, philosophical concepts, and social movements.

Ahmed Salman Rushdie, born on 19 June 1947 is a British-Indian novelist and essayist. His second novel, "Midnight's Children" (1981), won the Booker Prize in 1981. Much of his fiction is set on the Indian subcontinent. He is said to combine magical realism with historical fiction; his work is concerned with many connections, disruptions and migrations between East and the West. The only son of a University of Cambridge-educated businessman and school teacher in Bombay, Rushdie was educated at a Bombay private school before attending The Rugby School, a boarding school in Warwickshire, England. He went on to attend King's College at the University of Cambridge, where he studied history. After graduating, he spent his time working in television and for a brief period as a copywriter for an advertising agency, before pursuing a career as a writer. His first novel, "Grimus", was published in 1975, followed by other notable works, including "Midnight's Children" (1981) and "Shame" (1983). His first novel, "Grimus" (1975), a part-science fiction tale, was generally ignored by the public and literary critics. His next novel, "Midnight's Children" (1981), catapulted him to literary notability. This work won the 1981 Booker Prize. "Midnight's Children" follows the life of a child, born at the stroke of midnight as India gained its independence, who is endowed with special powers and a connection to other children born at the dawn of a new and tumultuous age in the history of the Indian subcontinent and the birth of the modern nation of India. After "Midnight's Children", Rushdie wrote "Shame" (1983), in which he depicts the political turmoil in Pakistan. "Shame" won France's Prix du

Meilleur Livre Étranger (Best Foreign Book) and was a close runner-up for the Booker Prize. His most controversial work, "The Satanic Verses", was published in 1988.

In addition to these books, Rushdie has published many short stories, including those collected in "East, West" (1994). "The Moor's Last Sigh", a family epic ranging over some 100 years of India's history was published in 1995. "The Ground Beneath Her Feet" (1999) presents an alternative history of modern rock music. He also wrote "Haroun and the Sea of Stories" in 1990. Rushdie has had a string of commercially successful and critically acclaimed novels. His 2005 novel "Shalimar The Clown" received, in India, the prestigious Hutch Crossword Book Award, and in Britain, a finalist for the Whitbread Book Awards. It was shortlisted for the 2007 International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award. His novel "Luka and the Fire of Life" was published in November 2010. Earlier that year, he announced that he was writing his memoirs, entitled "Joseph Anton: A Memoir", which was published in September 2012. In 2012, Salman Rushdie became one of the first major authors to embrace Booktrack (a company that synchronizes eBooks with customized soundtracks), when he published his short story "In the South".

"Shame" is Salman Rushdie's third novel, published in 1983. Like most of Rushdie's work, this book was written in the style of magic realism. The central theme of the novel is that violence is born out of shame. The concepts of shame and shamelessness are explored through all of the characters. "Shame" discusses heritage, authenticity, truth, and, of course, shame and shamelessness, as well as the impact of all these themes on an individual, the protagonist Omar Khayyám.

The whole plot in the novel "Shame" takes place in the town named "Q", where an old man Shakil raises his three daughters Chhunni, Munnee and Bunny very strictly, that even he won't allow his daughters to talk with their neighbors and totally isolated them from the outside world. One day Shakil died and his three daughters threw a very grand party in their house by inviting some of local VIPs. In the party one of the sisters becomes pregnant. But in order to hide that shame from the outside world all three sisters pretend to be pregnant and doesn't reveal who is the real pregnant lady. One day a son is born to them and they named him as Omar Khayyam, after a renowned poet who lived in their town. The three daughters raised their son very strictly as their father did and totally isolated him from the outside world. At the age of 12, Omar tries to escape from his town and fled to another new place where he excelled in the medical field and emerges as immunologist. He became friend with a girl Sufiya Zenobia, daughter of Raza Hyder who is the real character of shame in the novel. Sufiya was born to her parents when they expect a son. So even in her birth she borne the personification of shame. She has mental disorder, even in her age of 28 she thinks like girl of 9 years old. As she grows older, this shame intensifies and it expresses itself like an inner creature. Sufiya, whom Omar eventually marries, is consumed by this inner creature, a beast, till the point in which she remains exactly what she represents.

Sufiya's explosions are nothing but the explosions of her shame. Her parents and elder sister considers her as shame for their whole family. This circumstance can be seen clearly in all the families across the world. Family members of the mentally retarded children consider their children as shame and will hide them from the outside world. After her marriage with Omar, Sufiya doesn't find any advantage or caring from her husband. When she comes to know that her husband is having illegal relationship with a girl named Shahbanou, the beast within her grows up. That night she goes out from her house, rapes four boys and kills them. After this terrible act she doesn't become tired, which implies that she blends perfectly with her inner beast which she developed out of the shame she experienced. When her father Hyder and her husband Omar know this crime act they inject her twice a day in order to keep her unconscious and hide her in the attic. This doesn't suppress the beast of Sufiya, where as it stirs up and eventually she manages to escape from the house.

Sufiya Zenobia, the character to whom the novel's title alludes, is known as her mother's shame. The baby girl blushes in response to her mother's embarrassment and her father's anger. Her blushing represents a slow burning that builds with the passage of time. The humiliation keeps building until it erupts in the form of a beast that punishes male offenders. The fantastic elements of her character demonstrate how monstrous women's shame is to look at, if only it were something that could be seen. Through Sufiya Zenobia, Rushdie introduces the imaginative possibility of women's shame producing anger and self-pride rather than embarrassment and family honor. By creating a magical character that plays with the gendering of "Shame", he breaks down the taken-for-grantedness of female modesty. In "Shame" Rushdie presents "tradition" as a code of conduct that prevents Asian women from fighting British racism. This reading is evident in the second ghost that haunts Sufiya.

Sufiya represents the effort to imagine a different outcome for women who are the victims of male violence. Sufiya also feels ashamed, except that her response is redirected at the outside world. She is an exceptional woman because she not only feels her own shame but also the unfelt shame of others, men in particular. Men are forbidden to feel shame, for that would destroy their pride. This means that they hold their heads high only by disavowing their shameful actions. Salman Rushdie penned his novel "Shame" with the Pakistan background. Pakistani women are socialized into having strong family loyalty, the betrayal of which

brings shame upon themselves and their families. Wives who are physically abused often stay with their husbands in order to preserve the family pride. But this can be applicable to all Asian women.

Mahasweta Devi is one of the most popular contemporary writers of Bengali literature. She was born in 1926 at Dacca to literary family. She did her schoolings in Dhaka and later joined in the Visvabharati University in Santiniketan and completed B.A.(Hons) in English. She was married at the age of 20 to actor Bijon Bhattacharya. Her husband was a member of Communist Party of India (CPI). In order to support her family financially she did many odd jobs like selling dye powder, supplying monkeys for the research to U.S. and teaching at school. Later she began her teaching career at Bijoygarh College. She also worked as a journalist and dedicated herself to the struggle of tribal people against authoritarian upper caste landlords and government officers. She has won Ramon Magsaysay award in 1997, Padma Vibhushan the second largest civilian award from the Government of India in 2006 and Jnanpith award the highest literary award from the Sahitya Academy in 1996. She has contributed many great works to literary and cultural studies in the country. Her powerful, haunting tales of exploitation and struggle have been seen as rich sites of feminist discourse of leading scholars. Her use of language has broken down the conventional borders of Bengali literature. She is a significant figure in the field of socially committed literature. She also speaks about the exploitation of womanhood in the hands of male-chauvinism. Another major aspect that she deals is on the stupid rituals followed by the people which also sometimes draw back from their progress and which is a major factor for women to lose their identity.

“Bedanabala” is a beautiful story about a woman who was cornered by her people because of her profession. Even when the main character named Bedanabala wants to have her own identity, a segment of her society condemned her in the name of decency and social acceptance. “Rudali” is a piece of short fiction which neatly portrays the feminist position that continuously shed their identity in the country today. “In the name of mother – four stories” is a volume which represents a range of responses to the concept of the material exposing how the motherhood in India often conceals a collective exploitation. “Outcast – four stories” brings the life stories of four women who always encounter a relentless struggle for survival.

“Till Death Do Us Part” is one of the fictional works of Mahasweta Devi. It is a volume of five short stories spanning over three decades of writing, showing an unusual tenderness on the side of the author who is wildly known for her satiric prose and biting indictment of social inequalities. In this manuscript, three of her works are discussed. These fictions deal with the stories of elderly women and the men in their lives: husbands, lovers, sons and friends. These touching tales, with their humor, delicacy and warmth, are each centered on a woman character. In “The Divorce, Talaq”, Kuli finds herself unexpectedly divorced in the heat of a quarrel, but decides to defy societal taboos with her ex-husband who had been her companion of many years. In “The Saga of Kagaboga”, Mohini becomes lonely after her sons leave home and because her husband objects her verbosity, vows that she will henceforth talk only to crows and cranes. Finally, in “The Poet’s Wife”, Kamal discovers how harsh the indifference of today’s world can be.

The first story in the collection “Till Death Do Us Part” is “The Divorce, Talaq”. As the title suggest this story deals with the divorce between Kuli and Arshad. Kuli is the younger daughter of her father, Gonu. When the story begins, Kuli is speaking in an agitated tone to her father regarding her marriage. But later she realizes the character of her husband, Arshad and starts to lead a peaceful life with him. Kuli settles down herself properly with her son equipped in a school and finding out a job in a shipping company, getting married and living happily in Khidirpur.

“People said Kuli was lucky. She stored the money her son sent her in a brass container buried underground. The money she earned by selling eggs was what she used for their daily expenses. Kuli planned to build a new house and move into it before the next monsoon, but suddenly, all her dreams were shattered. Shattered the day Arshad uttered the three talaqs before their entire neighbourhood”. [Till Death Do Us Part - The Divorce, Talaq]

Kuli feels herself lucky to lead such a happy and peaceful life until her husband Arshad utters talaq to her for three times. When the grandson of Kuli falls ill, Arshad asks her to take him to the doctor. But Kuli who is not ready to spend the money saved out to buy a cow involves in an argument with Arshad. Blind with rage, Arshad shouts talaq to her wife. It is accepted in the caste of muslims that it will be considered a divorce between them if they utter talaq thrice. The readers are shocked by the rituals followed by the people. That too at an age of sixty, after getting a grandson, the men has power to do as they wish. Women are totally exploited here. It is clearly evident through the story of Kuli, who after her thirty five years of marriage life gets divorced because of a small argument – it is a high price to pay for asserting her individuality.

Kuli worries a lot after she gets divorced from Arshad, but she feels a strange sense of joy when she comes to know that her husband also feels the same way. So they both decide to unite again. Kuli’s son finds out a solution for this problem through his father-in-law, that the woman after divorce has to marry another person, should live with him for a while and only after divorcing the other person she will be made free to live with her divorced husband again. Kuli was shocked to hear the customs and cultures followed by the people. She says

that she is ready to drink poison instead of following these rituals. She meets her husband and reveals the plan that they can go and live a life in Kolkata, not as husband and wife but as companions, and like to stay together because they are used to it.

adopted and followed is clearly portrayed through the character of Kuli. Even at the end, she is not ready to lead a separate life, hiding her individual identity.

"The Saga of Kagaboga" is the second story in the collection, which shows a bit of development in the cultural features. This story speaks about the life story of Sadananda and Mohini. The conversation between husband and wife take place through the invisible Kagaboga. Their sons leave them and because of the unhappiness Mohini started talking to herself. It went to such a great extent that Sadananda thinks that she might have gone mad. The two sons of the couple settle down in a job even before they finish their schooling. The younger son was Mohini's life.

The younger son gets impressed by the new way of adoring himself and also with the recent development of science. Sadananda comes to know that his son has chosen a wrong path, when he elopes from the house taking the watch and golden earrings. So he decides to forget his son for his behavior. Mohini, who gets affected by the behavior of her son, becomes mentally ill and deliriously speaks round the clock. So the couple migrated to a new location. When her mental illness gets serious, Sadananda insists on taking her to a doctor, she shouts at the top of her voice:

"Am I responsible for Hindustan-Pakistan? Did I tell you to leave our homeland? Why did you leave everything to your nephew and come away? Even if you did, how come everyone else's life has improved while I'm still in this condition? A marriage made in heaven indeed! When we came we left behind all our precious belongings, and now you call me mad! Is it mad to talk a lot?" [Till Death Do Us Part - The Saga of Kagaboga]

From that day onwards Mohini used to call herself as Kagaboga, because he is annoyed by her speech and calls her mad. 'Kak' represents the crow and 'Bok' represents the crane. Through this she literally refers that she is not speaking to Sadananda but to the crows and cranes. These words clearly depict the mental torment that women undergo. But she soon recovers from her mental stress very soon and starts to dream of building a new house. The ability to construct the house inspires Mohini with an almost unreal sense of self-confidence. She also installs a new Chouki for the Goddess Lakshmi with great joy. Suddenly she hears a moaning sound of Sadananda who dies because of amssive heart attack. Happiness comes and drifts away as a blooming flower which remains fresh only for a short duration. As soon as she recovers from the mental agony caused by her son, she quarrels with her husband, but soon recovers herself and involves in the work of constructing the house. When she sits down happily after placing Goddess Lakshmi in the Chouki, a great thunder storm strikes her, by the death of Sadananda.

Thus, throughout the life, she faces struggle in various forms. It is not that she alone faces the struggles, but she stands and represents the whole of the womanhood who suffer at one instance and the other.

The next story, "The Poet's Wife", speaks about an unrecognized old and blind poet and his wife Prafullakamal, referred as Kamal. In this short story, the poet tries to get honor which goes in vain. This gives more pain to the poet. The poet's wife, Kamal, acts as a support to the poet in his every issue. A local businessman wants to organize a supportive programme to honor famous people in order to gain a recognizable place for him in the society. Since all the famous people refuse to attend the programme and moreover more money has to be spent by the businessman to invite the people of higher rank, he decides to unwillingly invite the poet and honor him. Owing to his illness the poet promises the businessman to send his wife Kamal for the programme on his behalf. Understanding the poet's enthusiasm, she helps him in preparing a good speech so that he can get some recognition and make a livelihood by asking for poet's pension. The poet insists his wife that the tone of the speech should appear as if he is delivering it. In spite of poverty, for the sake of gaining recognition for her husband, Kamal borrows a saree from the dry cleaners and brass jewellery.

The moment she enters the programme hall she realizes her position. All the other dignitaries are paid importance but she was just made to sit like a dumb doll on the dias. When she was offered a chance to deliver the speech on her husband's behalf, she trembles with fear because she should convey all the words as it is and at the same time she should make her husband's presence to be felt there through her speech. But everything changes upside down because of another woman named Pamela, a singer.

When Kamal starts to deliver her speech she gets interrupted by one of the organizer who asks her to make the speech short.

"The young people of today will need a short introduction to the poet"

Suddenly there was a great excitement outside the dias. She's here! She's here! Some people hurriedly left the room.

"In his poems one found simplicity, a love for nature, a passion for life...."
"Cut it short", interrupted the organizer. "Pamela has arrived". [[Till Death Do Us Part – The Poet's Wife]

Just to stop the poet's wife Kamal from her speech, the people on the dias gave her the memento in the name of the poet. As soon as she receives it, she gets down from the dias and reaches home. Heartbroken the poet's wife takes her husband into the house and shuts the door against the whole cast of humanity. Soon the poet realizes that she is crying. Kamal, who doesn't want to break her husband's heart, says that it is the tears of joy. She doesn't want to spoil their happiness for this mere issue and lies to her husband. In spite of her identity getting spoilt she makes her husband happy by giving false details. Kamal hides out all the ill-treatment paid to her in the programme. The thing that should be praised here is her attitude and the way she carries herself and her husband beyond all these odd situations.

II. Conclusion

Thus from the above mentioned short stories, Mahasweta Devi draws an excellent portrayal of the character of women, way they are exploited and their struggle in the hands of the menfolk, at the mercy of the cultures and rituals followed blindly by the people, which leads to their dooms in the end. Thus the theme highlighted is the continuous struggle of women for their identity. Salman Rushdie and Mahasweta Devi use their novels as excellent medium for conveying their message. Both writers were notable feminist and uses simple characters and domestic circumstances, in showing women as cornered object in the name of their profession, their birth and parentage.

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