

Gender, Identity, and Postcolonialism in Salman Rushdie's *Shame*

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Gender is a topic that is often viewed through a one-dimensional lens. The distinction between members of the opposite sex and the physical attributes that each should possess appear to be quite obvious. However, the typical assumption of male versus female being the only defining aspect of gender is not so simplistic. When viewed in terms of masculinity and femininity, the idea of gender can be explored on a much more broad and complex level. In the context of postcolonial literature, this is frequently the case. Postcolonialism focuses on cultural and national identity in literature produced by the people of current or former colonies in places like the Middle East, South Asia, Africa, and the Caribbean. Many postcolonial authors delve into the issue of gender when expressing their ideas about postcolonialism. How does an individual that lives in, comes from, or has history with a certain country or region which has been colonized, shape his or her identity? In the work of many Middle Eastern and South Asian authors, gender is one of the best tools to use when exploring identity. In Salman Rushdie's novel *Shame*, masculinity and femininity are important factors in how certain characters function. This growing desire to define identity as it relates to the characters in *Shame* is not only confined to the individuals in the story, but it is also an issue relevant to the nation of Pakistan as well. Most of the characters in the story are symbolic references to actual political figures in Pakistan. In addition, they also represent different periods in the country's history, both political and social.

To begin with, the relationship between Omar and his three mothers (Chunni, Munnee, and Bunny) is the center of the story. The title of the novel, and the fact that the mothers decided to raise Omar to feel no shame are a primary aspect of the novel. It is a theme that reoccurs constantly throughout the story and affects nearly every character. The reason for Omar's mothers to have raised him in this way is their attempt to rebel against the kind of upbringing they had. Their father was a very bitter man who didn't hesitate to express his shame and his anger towards his daughters and the world around him. These characters could very well represent the colonized era in Pakistan. The father represents the British Empire which dominated the area of Pakistan for a number of years, the mothers are the colonized period, and Omar is the new, independent Pakistan. The British Empire departs somewhat abruptly and leaves Pakistan with barely anything to support itself. This same desertion is mirrored in the death of Chunni, Munnee, and Bunny's father. The mothers desire to rid themselves, as well as Omar, of the oppression they were subjected to is directly comparable to the Pakistani people's dreams of cultural freedom for their next generation. Therefore, they raise Omar without a father figure to reject any feelings of shame regardless of the consequences. Omar's upbringing symbolizes the lack of structure that was left by the sudden departure of the British. Throughout the novel, we realize that the British Empire's decision in leaving the way they did results in an extremely chaotic state; both politically and socially.

As Omar journeys through the story, he uses his shameless upbringing as a means of justifying his actions. This all ties into the complex process of defining identity. Omar's lack of a strong father figure affects his masculinity and causes him to act in a way that his culture would view as weak, or "feminine." In turn, the same could be said about Pakistan's "postcolonial" government. But *Shame* isn't just Rushdie criticizing leaders of Pakistan. He primarily means to point out the instability in the country while suggesting that the problem is a result of the abrupt departure of the British Empire.

However, Rushdie does explore the political history of Pakistan and its leaders very thoroughly throughout the novel. The relationship between Iskander and Raza (who are the novel's equivalent to real world leaders Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and Zia ul-Haq) is probably the easiest characters to associate with the political situation in Pakistan. The novel was published in 1983 which was just six years after Zulfikar Ali Bhutto (Iskander) was overthrown by Zia ul-Haq (Raza) and four years after he was murdered in prison. Although Raza and Iskander are depicted as in the story, they are not related in real life. The novel portrays the two characters as having conflicting political views. Their differences are amplified due to their simultaneous relationship with the same mistress (Pinkie Aurangzeb). This is another example of how gender is used to express femininity and, furthermore, weakness in the story. The mistress (who possesses feminine qualities) represents the lack of

strength, or the apparent weakness, between the two political figures and the ideals they represent. Iskander is depicted as a democrat who supposedly wants the best for the Pakistani people while Raza is shown as a militant individual with a strong belief in Islamic tradition. Each of them battle over the mistress and for control of the nation. In reality, this lack of unity is very evident in the Pakistani government during the postcolonial years of the 1970s.

Rushdie also incorporates another familiar political figure in his novel. The daughter of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, Benazir Bhutto, is portrayed as Iskander's daughter, Arjumand Harappa. Arjumand's feelings about other individuals aren't subliminal at all in regards to who she views as weak. These characters are primarily Iskander's friend Omar, her mother Rani, and her father's mistress Pinkie Aurangzeb. Arjumand openly insults these individuals without remorse. Furthermore, she expresses her disdain for her own femininity by idolizing her father and wrapping bandages around her breast to keep them from showing. Her actions stay in tune with the idea of postcolonialism and identity. She quickly rejects the gender role that her culture would have her embrace. Instead, she adopts a more masculine personality that conflicts with the weaker, feminine individuals around her. Rushdie is not attempting to insult the female gender or those with feminine qualities. He is simply constructing a metaphor to convey a message of concern toward the people of Pakistan and the Middle East in general; a message that says there is a serious lack of strength and unity in that region both politically and socially.

In that same sense, Rushdie constructs another metaphor in *Sufiya Zenobia*. Sufiya's personality directly contrasts with the personality of Omar whom she ends up marrying. While Omar was raised to not feel shame, Sufiya has been surrounded by it since she was born. As a result, she feels the shame of other characters and reacts violently to it several times throughout the novel. She seems feminine and weak on the surface, but reacts with anger and passion in a much more masculine way than Omar. Rushdie may have intended for Sufiya's conflicting gender identity to be a reflection of the Pakistani people. Her violent reactions to shame mirror the riots of the young Pakistani citizens in response to their country's constant turmoil. In fact, this type of violence is illustrated effortlessly in the novel: "Looking at the smoking cities on my television screen, I see groups of young people running through the streets, the shame burning on their brows and setting fire to shops, police shields, cars. They remind me of my anonymous girl. Humiliate people for long enough and a wildness bursts out of them" (119). The narrator continues: "surveying the wreckage of their rage, they look bewildered, uncomprehending, young. Did we do such things? Us? But we're just ordinary kids, nice people, we didn't know we could... then, slowly, pride dawns on them, pride in their power, in having learnt to hit back" (119). The passage reinforces the comparison between Sufiya and the Pakistani youth perfectly.

Each of the characters in *Shame* is portrayed in some way, shape, or form as symbolic of the general history of Pakistan. The political and social undertones represented by the characters in the novel tie into the ideas of gender and identity as they do to postcolonialism. Rushdie's work is very controversial in the Middle East, and he is often criticized for his topics. However, for Western readers, the issues of the Middle East are quite often extremely difficult to grasp. So when a novel such as *Shame* presents these issues in a fictional world with characters that represent real leaders in the country and events that have shaped the country's history, it is much easier to identify with and understand the conditions the people of Pakistan are living in. The use of gender as a way of describing the political and social instability of the region, as well as the complex relationship between individuals struggling to define their identity, are all issues that many readers can sympathize with. Rushdie may have more Western readers questioning the fine line between masculinity and femininity in regards to their own identity.

Works Cited

Rushdie, Salman. *Shame*. New York: Picador, 1983. Print.