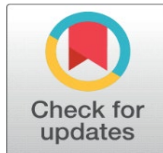
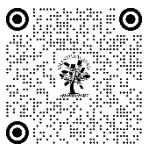


A STUDY ON THE PLIGHT OF MUSLIM WOMEN OF SALMAN RUSHDIE'S MIDNIGHT'S CHILDREN

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ABSTRACT

Islam is a highly orthodox religion and culture which considers woman as an inferior and subjugated being to man. The position of woman in it is considerably low. Marriage as a social institution does not confer any rights or power to women. Indeed, the married man is given freedom to have many wives and concubines. Women did not have any rights in the family as well as in the society during the pre-Prophet era. It was the Prophet who gave status and recognition to women in the Islamic culture. Even then, she cannot have control over her husband to have many wives. Divorcing a wife happens according to the whims and fancies of the husband. This research paper titled 'A Study on the Plight of Muslim Women of Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*' throws light on the sufferings, distress, pain and agony of female Muslim characters of the novel.

Keywords: Distress, Inferior, Islam, Society and Women

1. INTRODUCTION

Islam is a highly orthodox religion and culture which considers woman as an inferior and subjugated being to man. The position of woman in it is considerably low. Marriage as a social institution does not confer any rights or power to women. Indeed, the married man is given freedom to have many wives and concubines. Women did not have any rights in the family as well as in the society during the pre-Prophet era. It was the Prophet who gave status and recognition to women in the Islamic culture. Even then, she cannot have control over her husband to have many wives. Divorcing a wife happens according to the whims and fancies of the husband. This research paper titled 'A Study on the Plight of Muslim Women of Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*' throws light on the sufferings, distress, pain and agony of female Muslim characters of the novel. Rushdie is an acclaimed cosmopolitan writer who has been awarded the Booker of Booker Prizes. The novel virtually takes the readers across the important happenings of the twentieth century India – Jallianwala Bagh tragedy, India's freedom movement, independence and Partition and their bloodshed, language riots, Indo-Chinese War, Indo-Pakistan Wars, Bangladesh Liberation War and the Emergency. The novel was approached by scholars of the world on varied topics like Postmodernism, identity crisis, magic realism, narratology etc, it is yet to be analyzed from the perspective of the female Muslim characters like Dr Aziz's mother, Amina and Reverend Mother mainly because they are

minor characters when compared to Padma, Parvati and the midnight's children. Hence, in order to fill this gap, this aspect is chosen and an attempt has been made to highlight their suffering in the male dominated androcentric Muslim community.

2. THE PREDICAMENT OF DR AZIZ'S MOTHER

The first character to be taken into consideration is Dr Adam Aziz's mother. She is a nameless character who lives in Kashmir with her husband and son. She is a brave woman who in his absence for the medical studies at Germany underwent a lot of struggles in her life. His father has been affected by stroke and his mother does not even inform him about his sick father fearing that will spoil his studies. Suffering from stroke, his father becomes housebound and he masters how to communicate with birds: "... made bird-noises. Thirty different species of birds visited him" (MC 7-8). Since his mother is a traditional Muslim house wife, she has been housebound with her purdah. But she finds indomitable energy when her husband falls sick and she courageously runs the gemstone business of his father successfully. With her successful business, Adam Aziz finishes his studies along with the scholarship. When his father is deprived of his birds in 1918, he reaches the heavenly abode peacefully in his sleep. She is such a caring and loving wife that within the forty-day mourning of his death, she too joins him in the next world. Thus Dr Aziz's mother represents innumerable women who are made house bound by their life partners but comes out of their domestic world when the situation demands.

3. THE DIFFICULTIES FACED BY THE REVEREND MOTHER

The Germany returned physician, Dr Aziz, falls in love with the daughter of the rich land owner Ghani. Ghani who is visually challenged perfectly finds out Dr Aziz to be his son-in-law. Dr Aziz too falls in love with her having loved her in parts. The landscape of Kashmir is so beautiful that nobody wants to leave it. But Dr Aziz decides to leave it since he has become an orphan there and his wife criticizes his move. For her, "life outside her quite valley had come as something of a shock to her" (MC 36). But he has decided to move to Agra University. Though she is not interested in the move to Agra in 1919, she has to follow her husband. In Amritsar, she has a severe headache which is the only ailment which repeats and Dr Aziz cannot cure it because the pain was due to her life outside the valley. Having settled in Agra and being the mother of five children, Naseem is forced not to wear purdah because of the broad mindedness of Dr Aziz. But she despises it because she wants to lead her life as a simple ordinary Muslim wife. She argues with him when he dismisses the religious tutor of their children since he taught them communal disharmony. Against her wishes, he gives refuge to Nadir Khan which leads to the secretive marriage between him and Mumtaz, their second daughter and finally ends in their divorce. Dr Aziz who wants to perform the first marriage of his house between Ahmed Sinai and Alia in a grand manner with big marquee in the garden with singers and sweetmeats, is forced to perform the first marriage of the house between Mumtaz and Nadir Khan with no tents, no singers and no sweetmeats. She is enraged because she predicts such things and warns Dr Aziz who does not heed to her foresighted views. She knows well that Dr Aziz's modern ideas would ruin their children and likewise the first marriage of the house ended in divorce.

When Dr Aziz arranges for a life size photograph of all the family members in Agra, the Reverend Mother, Naseem Aziz, refuses to record an image of her thinking: "It was enough for her that she must live in unveiled, barefaced shamelessness – there was no question of allowing the fact to be recorded" (MC 48). She does not agree with the Western-minded Dr Aziz who allows his daughters to have male friends. As a dutiful mother, she identifies her daughter's dreams about their marriage plans. From the beginning, she does not approve of Ahmed Sinai because he is a divorcee at the young age of twenty. But when he marries Mumtaz for whom it is also a second marriage, she feels happy that "at least he is half Kashmiri" (MC 84). As per her predictions, Ahmed Sinai proves to be a failure in all the tasks he undertakes and Mumtaz's life is ruined because of him. She has full control over her kitchen and pantry and her family members have to eat whatever is cooked out by her. Even when Dr Aziz has constipation, he cannot choose his food.

The Reverend Mother is a strong character and a source of courage and confidence who after Dr Aziz's move to Kashmir at the old age, takes her widowed daughter-in-law, actress Pia, to Pakistan and owns a petrol bunk there. She is such a strong character that she single-handedly instills confidence and courage in her bereaved daughter-in-law in utmost critical situation. Dr Aziz's long nose is inherited by his grandson Saleem who comments about his grandparents that their marriage continues with arguments and disappointments and in that battle Dr Aziz does not win over the Reverend Mother.

4. THE INTRICACIES OF AMINA SINAI

The life style of a Muslim husband and his nature is symbolized through Ahmed Sinai. Saleem entitles his parents as “ill-matched” (MC 120). The dark complexion of Mumtaz separates her from her mother. She is not brilliant like her elder sister Alia and not beautiful like her younger sister Emerald. But her gentleness, care and fragility takes her to be more attached with her father and so she spends more time with him. After her second marriage with Ahmed Sinai, Mumtaz who is now transformed as Amina Sinai moves to the capital, Delhi. There she takes care in organizing the house: “Assiduously, she arranged flowers in the corridors and rooms of the Old Delhi house; carpets were selected with infinite care. She could spend twenty-five minutes worrying at the positioning of a chair. By the time she’d finished with her home-making, adding tiny touches here, making fractional alterations there, Ahmed Sinai found his orphan’s dwelling transformed into something gentle and loving” (MC 86). She constantly gives attention to her husband. But she is congested with the thought of her former husband Nadir Khan and so she is not able to love her husband. Like her father, she has decided to love her husband in parts.

Amina has divided her husband in parts and she selects one part of him every day and shows all her interests in that particular part. She becomes used to with his extreme loud voice and his peculiar behaviours. She educates herself to admire his love for fried foods and his knowledge on Persian poetry. Even though his hair has become thin and he has acquired a large stomach, she continued with “... her Herculean task, the task of accepting, bit by bit, that she must love a new man” (MC 88). But he has his hold on her and he does not even allow her to listen to All India Radio whereas his distant cousin Zohra can listen to it. He expects Amina to ask him for money in front of Zohra. Though it is an embarrassing moment for her, he likes to be asked and Amina has to seek him with honey coated words like “Janum, my life, please ...” and “... just a little so that I can make nice food and pay the bills ...” and “Such a generous man, give me what you like, I know it will be enough” (MC 90). He expects his wife to be dependent on him in front of his relatives and since he does not give her any money, she has to pick his pocket in the dead night. He does not even share his wife the blackmail that he, Mr Mustapha Kemal and Mr S P Butt receive from the fanatical anti-Muslim movement called Ravana. When she seeks information regarding this, it is a pity that he decides to leave the house while the others offer her some information.

At the time of Saleem’s birth, Ahmed Sinai breaks his toe and when the doctor and the mid wife Flora attend on him, Mary Pereira switches the name tag of the infants. After his birth, the importance given to Ahmed Sinai is reduced and baby Saleem has been given importance by his mother. She no longer begs him for money. Rather she authoritatively asks him for money in the name of baby Saleem. He does not succeed in all his business ventures and his work with the djinns and his attempts to buy the land under the sea are no exception. Moreover he is addicted to alcoholism and flirts with his office secretaries. Soon his cement promenade business partner Dr Narlikar defrauds him and so all his assets – bank accounts, bonds, rents from his Kurla properties – are frozen by the Government. Even in that critical time, Amina blames herself that the appearance of baby Saleem’s photo in the *Times of India* newspaper makes them popular and so the Government has frozen all their properties. Amina with her daughter in her womb decides to go for horse races in the Mahalakshmi Racecourse. She leaves the house hold chores to her mother and in spite of her morning sickness and varicose vein, she situates herself in the lines, “putting money on three-horse accumulators ... she backed mares ... she put her money on jockeys ... and won, and won, and won” (MC 191). Luck favours her a lot and she made Ismail Ibrahim their neighbor cum lawyer to proceed with the case against the freezing of Sinai’s properties. Finally on the day of her daughter’s birth, she wins the case in the High Court and receives all their assets. Even after the case is won by Amina, Ahmed neither appreciates her nor shows any interest in her.

After Dr Narlikar’s death, Ahmed Sinai, “... had taken flight into a dream-world of disturbing unreality” (MC 278). When the taxes are raised by the Government, he loses his temper at the breakfast table. Without even considering the presence of the children at the table, he shouts and comments about the Government in obscene language. He purposefully avoids coming to the breakfast table and thrives on cheap foods from his secretaries and is careless with his money dealings too. Amina can find his soiled clothes full of currency notes and she satisfies the familial needs with that money. In addition to this, he stops narrating bed time stories to the children. Even when he does it, those stories are “ill-imagined and unconvincing” (MC 279). Saleem at this point could sense the smell of failure in his father which he has found in Delhi. Becoming more alcoholic, all his secretaries leave him and Mary Pereira convinces her sister Alice Pereira as his secretary. He thinks in an exotic way and orders everyone to drive to Hornby Vellard and on their return, against the wish of his family, he abandons his dog for no acceptable reason. Sherri runs after the car and meets its end miserably. Then for Saleem’s tenth birthday, he presents another dog – an Alsatian puppy, which too dies within six months.

When Saleem loses a part of his left middle finger after losing his lock of hair, Ahmed Sinai begins to suspect his wife since Saleem's blood group does not match with those of his parents. When he asks "Just look, where am I in that face" (MC 327), poor Amina is completely shattered. Because Saleem has inherited his grandfather's long nose which none of his sons and daughters inherit. Amina begs him saying "No, janum, I won't let you believe such things about me! I'll kill myself! I'll" (MC 327). Mary Pereira confesses her crime to the entire family during the mourning days of Hanif, Saleem's maternal uncle, who has committed suicide by walking off his Marine Drive flat. Ahmed Sinai becomes hysteric and starts ravings against everyone at home. Not able to tolerate his ravings, the Reverend Mother who comes to their house for the mourning persuades her to take her children and go to Pakistan leaving her husband: "... there was no shame in leaving an inadequate husband...a man of unspeakable vileness. Go from him; go today, and take your children...away from these oaths which he spews from his lips like an animal...of the gutter" (MC 394). So Amina with her children and Pia moves to Pakistan and lives there as "social inferiors" (MC 407). For four long years, she lives there under the shadow of the Zulfikars. During these four years, Alice Pereira is the only human companion for Ahmed Sinai who is full of hatred, resentment, self-pity and grief.

When Ahmed Sinai is admitted at the Breach Candy hospital, on seeing her sick husband, Amina "jerked out of lethargy and depression and guilt-fogs and verruca-pain" (MC 413). She regains her strength of her youth and starts to nurse him. Astoundingly, he regains his "contrition and forgiveness and laughter and generosity and the finest miracle of all, which was love" (MC 413). Finally his father has fallen in love with his mother and Saleem becomes the lamb which was sacrificed for their love. Slowly, she persuades him to move to Pakistan, where her family members have migrated some fifteen years back. When the Zulfikars hosted a dinner for the officials of high rank in the Pakistan army, the women folk of the family – Emerald, Amina and Pia – stands behind Zulfikar "with expressions on their faces which would have seemed more appropriate at a funeral than a social gathering" (MC 400). Back in Karachi, they have started to build a new home implanting the umbilical cord of Saleem. Amina feels happy and she exclaims that "... we shall all be new people now" (MC 429).

In Pakistan, Ahmed Sinai ventures into a new business with towels. He becomes confident that within two years he would become one of the richest men in Pakistan like the Dawoods, Saigols and Haroons. All this is because of his love for Amina. With modern machinery, he manufactures top quality terry cloth towels with its name Amina Brand. Soon Amina is pregnant again after some seventeen years. Ahmed's business graphs goes downwards and he too is hit by stroke. When she is in the advanced stage of pregnancy, the entire family is killed in the shell explosion thrown by the Indian Army during the Indo-Pakistan war. Jamila, Saleem's sister takes refuge with the nuns and Saleem having lost his memory joins the Pakistan army as a human dog.

Amina is not able to forget her first love Nadir Khan who later transforms himself as Qasim Khan and joins the Communist Party of India. But her love for her husband and children are really true and she struggles hard in her life. She is responsible for Alia's spinsterhood but her family falls at her feet for mercy. It is Alia who instills fear in Amina regarding her late pregnancy.

Salman Rushdie who feels at home both in the East as well as in the West undeniably has an impressive hold on the world literary scene. In the novel chosen for the present study *Midnight's Children*, he mixes historical events and fantasy in order to bring out a linguistic extravaganza. Almost all the Muslim women characters of the novel face humiliation in the domestic level and they are depicted as strong as opposed to the androcentric Muslim world. Dr Aziz is an exception because of his Western education and broadmindedness. Ahmed Sinai is a complete failure and it is his wife Amina who with her indomitable energy and power brings the family to a respectable state. Unfortunately, all the members of Dr Aziz meet their end in Karachi and Rawalpindi and Saleem is the only one to escape such a catastrophe in order to suffer more in East Pakistan and India.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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