

Rushdie's Views on Women, Love, and Sex: Some Illustrations from Rushdie's *an Enchantress of Florence*

Rushdie's Treatment of Female Characters always Denotes Implied Strategies of Male Dominance" (Aziz Ahmad qtd by Piciucco 121).

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It is certainly a matter of interest to many to know what Rushdie thinks of women, love and sex in general. After all he is a husband of not just one but four wives! Since it is said that literary creations reflect the mind of the creators (Freud), probably the answer is found in his literary creations. His acclaimed novel *Enchantress of Florence* can be taken as a case at hand.

Enchantress of Florence, primarily, is a book written by a man who attempts to write about the budding power of a woman named Angelica. She is also known as Qora Koz, or the Lady Black Eyes. Even in this eponymous novel, all the women characters, including the protagonist, are introduced and discussed from the perspective of male characters. This is the world that a male writer has created in order to gratify male ego.

The main characters of this novel are men, and their roles are full of adventures and glory. And it is through the eyes of these men that we get to know the women. What this male perspective brings to light, however, is that women are all good for one thing: physical gratification. The narrator in *Enchantress of Florence* says: "Now he wanted the most comfortable bed that could be had, and a woman, preferably one without a mustache, and finally a quantity of the oblivion, the escape from self, that can never be found in a woman's arms but only in good strong drink.(5)" This narrator in the very beginning of the novel compares women with alcohol, and gives his strange verdict that women are very less intoxicating, compared to strong drinks. Are women just a matter of intoxication to this narrator? Are they good just for sex, nothing else? It seems, for this narrator, every female character is a prostitute, a concubine, a courtesan, or someone's extravagantly unfaithful wife.

Rushdie's female characters seem so powerless and insignificant. The narrator of *Enchantress of Florence* writes:

Long ago in Castle Hauksbank he quarreled with his wife, a tiny barking woman with curly red hair and a jaw like a Dutch nutcracker and he had left her in the Highlands to farm black sheep and gone to seek his fortune like his ancestor before him and captained a ship in the service of Drake when they pirated the gold of the Americas from the Spanish in the Caribbean Sea. (7)

Why does Rushdie portray male and female characters in this light? His male characters are often powerful and lively whereas his female characters are void beauties, reduced to nothing more than slaves, whores, prostitutes, and witches. They are interchangeable, and they exist only to serve the needs of men.

It is not that Rushdie has not given power to women characters in this novel, for example, he has made the enchantress very powerful, but it's not the power she can use. She is powerful in one sense i.e. she can make men fall in love with her. Is this the real power women hold? Rushdie's *Stowaway* says "A man under the enchantment of love is a man easily distracted and led" (11). Where is the place of love in this world that Rushdie has designed?

Rushdie, in *Enchantress of Florence*, cleverly creates the most beautiful woman on earth Jodha, but the narrator says that she is just aphantom, not a real woman. In his description of Jodha, readers come to know what exactly does the writer think of women in general. The narrator says:

The limitless beauty of the imaginary queen came from one consort, her Hindu religion from another, and her uncountable wealth from yet a third. Her temperament, however, was Akbar's own creation. No real woman was ever like that, so perfectly attentive, so undemanding, and so endlessly available. She was an impossibility, a fantasy of perfection. They feared her, knowing that, being impossible, she was irresistible, and that was why the king loved her best. (21)

For the narrator no real woman can completely satisfy a man. They all lack this or that and they are all imperfect. Does he want to imply that a man's search of perfect happiness does not come from any real woman- they all are incapable of giving men what they want!

Many stories in Indian subcontinent tell us that Jodha was a real person. Why does Rushdie turn Jodha into an imaginary being? Is it because she is so perfect, so enticing, and so satisfying? Not only that Rushdie's king Akbar tells us what women are and what men are supposed to do with them. He says:

"Women think less about men in general than the generality of men can imagine. Women think about their own men less often than their men like to believe. All women need all men less than all men need them. This is why it is so important to keep a good woman down. If you do not keep her down she will surely get away." (24)

So keeping women down is a man's duty? Is this what King Akbar thinks? Or is it what Rushdie thinks? Rushdie's Jodha even pronounces, "When a boy dreams up a woman he gives her big breasts and a small brain," ... When a king imagines a wife he dreams of me.(24)" Is it really Jodha speaking or the author's male ego?

When Rushdie describes how Jodha acted, it becomes very apparent that his female characters speak writer's thoughts, not their thought. They are just vessel for him to express his wildest desires. The narrator says:

She was adept at the seven types of unguiculation, which is to say the art of using the nails to enhance the act of

love... Now that he was home, she could make him shudder, could actually make his hair stand on end, by placing her nails on his cheeks and lower lip and breasts, without leaving any mark ...And no living woman was as skilled as she at the Peacock's Foot, that delicate maneuver: she placed her thumb on his left nipple and with her four other fingers she "walked" around his breast, digging in her long nails, her curved, claw like nails which she had guarded and sharpened in anticipation of this very moment, pushing them into the emperor's skin until they left marks resembling the trail left by a peacock as it walks through mud. (24-25)

Isn't it the fantasy of the writer himself? Being based on an interview given by Rushdie, The Guardian writes:

The book's eponymous heroine is a woman variously known as Qara Kōz and Lady Black Eyes. She is expert in seven types of unguiculation which is - as Rushdie puts it - "the use of the nails to enhance the act of love". "I spent a lot of time doing the research, not just on Florentine history, Mughal history and not just into the Kama Sutra, but studying other texts about the erotic arts. It's not all about gymnastic positions. There's stuff in the novel based on research about brews and potions formulated to help one have 97 successive ejaculations."

97 successive ejaculations! Rushdie himself confesses it in this interview. Many years later, Padma Laxmi, his ex wife charges Rushdie for being too demanding on sex in her autobiographical book titled *Love, Loss, and What We Ate*. Surprising when Rushdie was writing *An Enchantress of Forence*, he had been just divorced from Padma Laxmi.

Even the character that is deemed favor in the title of this book, the enchantress of Florence, also known as Qora Koz, and later on as Angelica, is assigned power only through her beauty and the sorcery. She is powerful because with her magic she can instantly win men's heart. Is this what is the worth of a women for this narrator? Is this what Rushdie thinks of women in general?

In contrast, the men in this novel all fall in love—for women seem to provide them with a place of home and safety and warmth—but this love is superficial. The women, whether they are slaves, abandoned princesses, or prostitutes, fill men with physical desire because they are outwardly beautiful. They are the witches and sorceresses who are capable of doing one thing—hypnotize men and put them under the spell of women. And this is the power that Rushdie supplies the women characters in his novel. They are just secondary beings in the novel, in the world designed by a male writer. Rushdie describes Angelica's experiences as,

She is only a woman. And in the morning after she tells her story, after yet another stranger's hands have fondled her body as if it weren't her own, she goes mad, running through the courtesan's mansion without stopping, for she has awoken to remember how her family had been murdered and how her body had been used, and raped, and groped, and prodded as if it was nothing more than a body, unattached to a self, a woman, a girl who had lost her childhood, her place, her identity, and even her voice.

His perspective of women—and the narrative that he inscribes upon them—is offensive, and dangerous. Their beauty is skin-deep, their powers are weak and they are often reduced to either witches or whores. The women characters stories are limited because they are told from the perspective of male characters who see them only as interchangeable vessels of pleasure that can be controlled and consumed. The narrator says:

There is a weakness that comes over men at the battle's end, when they become aware of the fragility of life, they clutch it to their bosoms like a crystal bowl they almost dropped, and the treasure of life scares away their courage. At such a time all men are cowards, and can think of nothing but women's embraces, nothing but the healing words only women can whisper, nothing but losing themselves in the fatal labyrinths of love.

Fatal labyrinths of love? What an expression! Can't we say this attitude of the author reflects his misogynist tendency? *Enchantress of Florence* is not the only case at hand. It is not an exception. In Rushdie's other novels also we

find ample instances, which support the same thesis, that Rushdie is not very sensible to women characters. His magnum opus novel *Midnight's Children* also does the same. Regarding *Midnight's Children* Khomdram Shyamsundram Singh writes:

The novelist has indeed designed a blot of sorts each for all the women characters, not with an ulterior motive to lend them an aura of being only flesh and blood, but to either demeanor stigmatize them: Padma is like a plaything for Saleem; Reverend mother is conventional to a fault; Alia is vindictive; Emerald has no love for her sisters; Amina Sinai, Pia and Lila Sabarmati are tarred with the brush of infidelity; Elvyn and Brass Monkey embody both wildness and violence; Parvati's life ends on a very sordid note and the historical personality Indira Gandhi is depicted as a demon in the form of a woman.(55)

Another acclaimed novel entitled *Shame* also portrays women very negatively. The famous critic Aziz Ahmad himself has written about it. He writes: "Throughout, every woman, without exception, is represented through a system of imageries which is sexually over determined: the frustration of erotic need . . . appears to be in every case, the central fact of a woman's existence" (1467).

Why does Rushdie portray women characters in such a negative light? Why does he view love and sex so lightly? Natarajan beautifully puts it as; "These women are the blank pages onto which Rushdie inscribes the dark underbelly of his imaginary history, chronicling the nation turned nightmare through the paradigm of female monstrosity" (407).

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