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A Feminist Study of Salman Rushdie's *Shalimar: The Clown*

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Abstract:

Feminism analyses about freedom of women from gender bias and discrimination. Object of feminist theory is to change the way readers understand literature. It is a criticism that seeks to change the devaluation of females at home and in society and wants to transform literature, education and criticism from women's point of view. This paper focuses on women's struggle to survive, and the right to lead an honored life as an individual. This study also concentrates that freedom should be provided to women to take their own decision. With the help of fictional characters the focus is on that women should not be treated from someone else's negative or positive view points. But they should have their own entity and space in this world.

Keywords: Feminism, Patriarchy, Identity, Independence.

Through the ages, thinkers have tried to find an answer to the question 'What is a woman?' Feminist literary studies and texts have tried to put forward new queries about social, individual and cultural representation of females. Attempts have been made to make women subordinate directly or indirectly, to lose her identity and are forced to accept patriarchal norms. Feminists have always emphasized that responsibility and freedom should be provided to a person to make oneself a self – governing individual, so that a person can recognized his or her abilities or inabilities to flourish in this life. But women's struggle for recognition in patriarchal society is tabooed. Females' sense of identity is not completely constructed because they are positioned as 'Other' in patriarchal societies. This lack of female

identity and self is also represented in literature by various authors. Many authors have represented females as objects of male fears and fantasies. They are not represented as independent individuals. Roles of women are limited and are expected to fulfil only domestic roles of mother, wife, sister or daughter. Nobody wants to question about her happiness, satisfaction and wishes. A woman is not free to listen to her free voice and decide about her life. Feminism analyses about freedom of women from gender bias and discrimination. Feminism also wants to promote opportunities and equality to women with men at all levels. Feminist literary criticism is not only about interpretation of literature from female point of view. Object of feminist theory is to change the way readers understand literature. It is a criticism that seeks to change the devaluation of females at home and in society and wants to transform literature, education and criticism from women's point of view. Wendy discusses that in ancient Indian Dharma Shasta's, social law and code, females were asked to live according the made rules. He points out, "There were rules decreed for a woman which asserted that a woman should not do anything independently even in her house and should be under the control of the male members in the family." (Wendy 115-116) She had to work like a maid, provide food like a mother and serve her husband like a beloved. So throughout the ages women were provided passivity and never experienced independence. Simone de Beauvoir, in *The Second Sex*, considers marriage as a means of oppression that binds a female to domestic rules. Judith Butler points out, "De Beauvoir suggested gender is an aspect of identity which is gradually acquired." [1][2]. Male dominated society believes that a woman is satisfied and happy if her needs are fulfilled and required protection is provided. Her desire to grow and know more is not considered important for fulfilment of her human spirit and abilities in place of limited protection and happiness provided by male counterpoint. De Beauvoir observed, "This kind of life offers no liberty at all because that disregards female emancipation and ties a woman to her home where she performs household



works that might not involve any kind of rationalism and does not strengthen her thinking potential.” (De Beauvoir 301) Giving birth to a child is not considered “creative”. Being female giving birth to a child is her primary duty. But her influence on child is short lived. Father’s name is provided to the child. In such patriarchal societies where women have to struggle a lot to attain identity and survive, feminist studies analyze and highlight the problems of women through literature. This study focuses on women’s struggle to survive, and the right to lead an honored life as an individual. This study also concentrates that freedom should be provided to women to take their own decision. With the help of fictional characters the focus is on that women should not be treated from someone else’s negative or positive view points. But they should have their own entity and space in this world. Their life, living, opinions, destinies, creativities are their own. Enough freedom and independence should be provided to a woman to grow in her life, so that she can decide for herself and recognize her potential[3]. Rushdie’s female characters in *Shalimar the Clown* refuse to agree with phallogocentric world that had made them silent and fatigued. They have to suffer in their life but at the end they win. Many times they are lonely, hurt, betrayed and killed but their will and spirit remain unconquerable. Salman Rushdie’s *Shalimar the Clown* is a tale of a Kashmiri girl’s journey through marriage, love, motherhood, adultery and death. Boonyi is a young girl of a small village Pachigam in Kashmir. She belongs to a Pandit family. Her name means ‘Earth’. But she likes to be called by name Boonyi, name of a local Kashmiri chinar tree. She loves a Muslim boy Shalimar. Initially Shalimar is a fun loving and carefree boy. He had excellent talent of balancing on rope. Boonyi is very confident girl. She is single girl child of her widowed father. Her father raises her with all love and care. She is very confident about her physical beauty. She is a good dancer. She always wants to enjoy immense freedom. She knows about unconditional and immense love of Shalimar but she is also aware about the limitations of this relation. These limitations were like encroachment on her free

will and love for immense freedom. She wants to excel in art of dance. She is known as 'Anarkali' in her village. When American Ambassador to India, Maximilian Ophuls, visits Kashmir, she is chosen as main dancer to entertain him. During the performance she realizes that only Ophuls can help her to fulfill her dreams of becoming an excellent dancer and to enjoy immense freedom. She goes with other members of her dance group to perform at Delhi and decides not to come back with them. Shalimar goes to Delhi to bring her back. But she decides not to meet him. She accepts terms of Ophuls and very confidently puts her conditions also before him. She is ready to offer her body to Ophuls in place of costly gifts and high class standard of life. Maximilian arranges a dance guru for her. She has dreams to be famous with her dancing art. She ruins her marriage, deceives her lover and husband, Shalimar and chooses to be Ophuls' mistress. Her images of loveable wife and a docile daughter are wasted with her over ambitions. Her adulterous act changes lives of her husband, father and her own life also. Her action is not justifiable according to the moral ethics of society. But her action symbolizes the urge of a female to live life according to her own choice. She wanted relief from bounded village life. She tries to fulfill her dreams with the help of Ophuls but her means to get freedom were not wise. She never forgets Kashmir. Again and again she recalls about Kashmir, her father and her husband. Boonyi wished for a freedom, "But free isn't free of charge" (253). She selected a false freedom for herself. Her dream for freedom and free life become an illusion. Mathur points out, "She like Eve, is easily tempted and eagerly accepts the Ambassador's offer of a change." [5] Boonyi's ambition for liberation takes her away from home. She has to lose rank of a dutiful wife and honor of daughter-in-law to fulfill her dreams. In patriarchal society, a woman who leaves her husband and home to fulfill dreams is never accepted again. She has to face isolation and desolation whole life. She becomes an object in society. After the birth of her daughter, she names new born daughter as Kashmira. But as decided earlier between Boonyi and wife of



Ophuls, Kashmira is handed over to wife of Ophuls. Boonyi returns to her home, her village Pachigam, her Kashmir. But nobody accepts her back. She is treated like a ghost. In the village, after her elopement, a proper ten days mourning was followed. She was registered as a dead person in office also. During her stay with Ophuls she sold her body and talent to get some things. Her life was like a prostitute. After coming back, she was provided lonely and isolated life on a small hill. She waits to be forgiven by Shalimar, her husband. Her father visits her hut and sells her vegetables. She always waits for her husband Shalimar. With the passage of time she loses her excess wait. But the signs of her past adulterous life were always present on her body. One night her husband comes, she welcomes him, prepares food for him, but he kills her mercilessly. No mercy and reconsideration is given to a woman who tries to fulfill her dreams. Laws are different for men and women in this society. Ophuls also committed same mistakes. But he is accepted by his society. But Boonyi is rejected. Being husband and member of male dominated society Shalimar kills his wife, Boonyi. A woman is not allowed to live her life according to her own choices. Boonyi is an exception. She is not docile, submissive, and conventional. She is ambitious, revolting and confident. But at the end she is also a castaway and is no more treated as a member of human society. If a woman wants to live life in an honored, she has to follow certain patriarchal rules. She cannot cross parameters of strict morality of male dominated society. Active and equal participation of females in productive society is very necessary. They should be provided some freedom and liberation along with responsibilities of home and child care. In our society to understand the position of women, we have to do more than comparisons that they are member of male dominated society. Literature has been used as a medium by feminists. They subvert and challenge the established patterns of patriarchal norms of society. With the help of literature writers try to bring forth the oppression and isolation of women that they experience and undergo during their life time. The objective of study is to find out resource and strategies to

represent stereotypical images of women. These stereotypes justify women's subordination and gender inequality. Before feminist theory and criticism readers were forced to read from male point of view. With the growth and development of feminism, female perspective developed and promoted gender equality. Still many questions wait for answers. Is it possible that females don't have to face discrimination and oppression in their lives? Is it possible for writers and theorists to make a change in the way females are treated in society? To read a text from female point of view, identifying the tools of domination, analyzing the basic needs of women is not enough. Our society has to do a lot to eradicate the fear of closed space and insecurity among women. Society has to treat women as sensible human beings. This study is a minor attempt to point out the abilities and chances of a woman to identify with her own self and society. Nyla Ali Khan in her book *Islam, Woman and Violence in Kashmir* discusses about the concept and depiction of "Native women" in Kashmiri literature. In this book she also discusses about the expected behavior of women in patriarchal society. In *Shalimar the Clown* Rushdie depicts three generations of Kashmiri women. In this novel Rushdie has depicted an evolution of Kashmiri women away from the native women. Women in this novel are aware, confident and self-actualized. Rushdie has used the tale of Sita, wife of Ram, who was kidnapped by Ravana [6]. Rushdie points out:

"Her only source of protection is a magic line that would protect her, if she never invited anyone over it; the plan fails when Sita invites him over the line and he kidnaps her resulting in war." (Rushdie 49)

Boonyi, the female protagonist, interprets Sita tale, "a woman confronting her destiny, the men interpret the story as a representation of how a woman's silliness can undo the power of men." (Rushdie 50). Boonyi's interpretation shows the notion of Patriarchal society that women need protection and care of men and they cause trouble. Nyla Ali Khan Points out,



“This is typical of how the Kashmiri society treats stories of women that promote female independence because it undermines the submissive role they believe women should uphold.” [4]. Male dominated society expects a special submissiveness from women. Through the characters of Pamposh, Boonyi and India (Kashmira) Rushdie depicts similarities and gap between generations. He has also depicted the evolution of female characters. Pamposh is representative of first generation of Pandit’s family. Pamposh is very close to Native Kashmiri women. She is a traditional wife who always wants to please her husband in every possible way. Rushdie depicts Pamposh before India’s independence from Britain. Her time is time of harmony and peace. Rushdie depicts, “It’s a time of general harmony, a harmony she contributes to by acting as a dutiful wife who pleases her husband and bears his children.” (110) Her friend Firdaus comments that this traditional behavior of Pamposh is only a guise or appearance. Firdaus says, “It’s just your shell, your hard walnut shell, and inside you’re a completely different girl.” (Rushdie 52) Pamposh’s Nickname is Giri or walnut kernel. So Pamposh prefers a nickname suitable to her nature. She is a good wife and straightforward and frank friend also. But she is different from native women because she is not very docile and submissive. The most important aspect of her difference from native women is her straight forwardness and frankness about sex. According to Kashmiri culture sex is a job that a woman should do for her husband. She herself cannot enjoy it. But Pamposh is very frank about sex. She discusses openly with her friend Firdaus about it. Firdaus Narrator points out, “Pamposh had a personality so intensely sexual that it was a wonder (her husband) was still able to get up out of it.” (Rushdie 54) Narrator is trying to point out that in Kashmiri culture sex is a means of enjoyment and pleasure for men. But Pamposh enjoys the game of sex with her husband and plans to enjoy sex. Being a dutiful wife proves her nearness to native women. Publically she is a dutiful wife, who always tries to please her husband. But privately she frees herself from societal restraints and enjoys life

to the full. Distancing from native women is her evolution. Pamposh's daughter Boonyi has also some traits of her mother's personality. Boonyi is part of crisis times of independent India. She spends her life during conflict. Boonyi grows under supervision of her father Pandit Payarelal. She is single girl child of her parents. Her mother dies after Boonyi's birth. With the passage of time Boonyi becomes an obsession and weakness of her father. Like Pamposh, Boonyi is of rebellious nature. Like her mother she rebels and changes her name from Bhoomi to Boonyi. Her birth name Bhoomi suggests "The Earth". The name, Bhoomi suggests a portion of land, an object to be owned by someone. She likes to be called by the name Boonyi, a Kashmiri word for tree. A tree is a symbol of growth and development. So like a tree Boonyi also wants to grow. Boonyi follows her dreams and desires. Her dreams deviate her from patriarchal system. Such departure from patriarchy can be seen in her relationships with Shalimar before marriage and with Ophuls after marriage. In traditional Indian societies it is believed that a woman should remain chaste until her marriage and she should develop sexual relations with her husband only. But Boonyi develops sexual relations with Shalimar, her lover. She leaves her house during nights to meet Shalimar. She is very passionate. Boonyi belongs to a Hindu family and Shalimar is from a Muslim family. But Boonyi follows her own passions and asks Shalimar for physical relations. They undermine all cultural and religious standards of society in which they live. When their parents come to know about their relations they fix their marriage. They want to save their families and children from shame. Marriage ceremonies start according to Hindu and Muslim customs. Boonyi is not excited about her marriage. She realizes, "married life..... didn't begin to satisfy her hunger." (Rushdie 114) For Boonyi marriage is a check on her freedom that limits her independence. She feels uncomfortable and a bounded after her marriage. After her marriage she gets a chance to escape her family. She meets American Ambassador Maximilian Ophuls when he visits Kashmir. Narrator says, "Following her marriage, she sees



her opportunity to escape when the American Ambassador Maximilian Ophuls comes to Kashmir.” (Rushdie133) During dance performance she tries to influence and attract Ophuls with bodily movements. Narrator points out, While most women’s bodies are expected to be submissive to a man, Boonyi uses her body strategically as a negotiating tool. She agrees to leave with Max and be his mistress, under the condition the he provide her with school and a chance to escape. (Rushdie 190) After some time she realizes that she has fallen herself into another imprisonment. Again and again she recalls and misses Kashmir. She regrets leaving Kashmir. She tries to be happy with costly gifts from Maxmilian. But she can never live under the control of men in her life. She denies the control of patriarchy (Max). She only shows and acts to take contracepts but actually she never gulps the contraceptive tablets and gets pregnant with Max’s child. Knowingly she avoids taking birth control pills. So at last she is capable to escape hold of male domination and Max. Traditional native women have a special kind of submissiveness but Boonyi revolts against the patriarchal system in her own ways. She uses her body to get whatever she wants to capture in her life and to fulfill her desires. When Max comes to know about Boonyi’s pregnancy he starts avoiding her and tries to get rid from her in every possible way. Max’s wife meets Boonyi. She offers her a deal that after birth she, Boonyi, should give her child to wife of Ophuls. She will be provided every help to return to Kashmir. Unfortunately Boonyi has to face the consequences. Her new born baby is taken from her. She names her child Kashmira but wife of Ophuls changes the name from Kashmira to India. Boonyi comes back to Kashmir. But in Pachigam Boonyi was already shunned from her own society. She was declared dead by her family. A proper mourning was followed. She was registered dead officially. When she returns everybody treats her like a ghost. Her own family denies accepting her. Boonyi’s decision to escape her family is taken as a betrayal to village and whole community. Her action against male domination becomes a reason for her shunning from society and family. After refusal from

society she has to live in seclusion on top of a hill in the hut. She spends nights and days in loneliness. She waits for her husband Shalimar. At this phase of her life she submits herself to patriarchy and welcomes her husband when he comes to kill her. She devotes herself to be killed rather than fighting and revolting. Kashmira is daughter of Boonyi and Max. According to deal after birth Kashmira is given to wife of Max. She changes new born girl's name from Kashmira to India. She is brought up in West by Max's wife. In Western society more emphasis is given on female independence than Indian societies. But spiritually and culturally she is Kashmiri. Narrator points out, "Despite Peggy's attempts to stifle India's heritage, she feels the name is a burden." (Rushdie 14) From her childhood India is of revolting nature. During childhood she is brought up by Peggy. There is no connection between father and daughter. Max sees her after 10 years. Very soon they mix with each other. After the first meeting of India and Max, Peggy realizes that she has lost her daughter. India is sole heir of her father's property. She is of arrogant nature. Novel starts with India and ends with Kashmira. When she comes to know about her mother Boonyi and her birth name Kashmira, she is aware that the name India does not suit her. She feels a kinship with Kashmir and prefers to be called Kashmira. She never liked her name India. But name Kashmira is a best representative of her identity and legacy. Like her mother, Boonyi and grandmother, Pamposh, she has sexual desires. While Boonyi and Pamposh had physical relations with men who had impact on their life, like Pamposh had sex with her husband Pandit and Boonyi had physical relations with husband Shalimar and Maxmilian Ophuls. But Kashmira has relations with many men. Narrator explains, "Kashmira's relationships with men are meaningless, shown with her inability to remember the name of the man with whom she has an ongoing relationship." (Rushdie 34) She has only physical involvement with these men. There is no emotional attachment between India and her sexual Partners. She reverses the traditional role of women to be seen as only to satisfy male needs. But in India's case men



provide service. Kashmira not only subverts the patriarchal rule but encounters it. Her mother Boonyi also abandoned her family and husband to fulfill her desires but at last she offers herself to be killed by Shalimar, considering her past life as a sin. But on the other hand Kashmira prepares herself to face Shalimar. With the help of trainers she undergoes a physical transformation to become a woman warrior. She gets herself ready for the battle. Her male instructor demotivates her by saying that her fights and exercises will damage her beauty. But she is ready to face the damage and determinately builds her bodily powers. When she encounters Shalimar at the end of the novel she is ready to face him. The results of their last fight are unknown but she refuses her fate to be decided by men and creates her own space. So in this novel Rushdie has depicted the abilities of women to evolve. He is able to depict how women break away from male expectations and abandon patriarchy to fulfill their desires and hopes. They are able to deviate from the image patriarchy wants to provide them.

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