



PLIGHT OF PADMA IN MIDNIGHT'S CHILDREN

RAJESH S. NITNAWARE

Asst. Professor
Smt. RDG College, Akola.
(MS) INDIA

DR. ULKA S. WADEKAR

Associate Professor
Smt. K. L. College, Amravati.
(MS) INDIA

ABSTRACT

Salman Rashdie is universally acclaimed as the most famous novelist who has prominently focused on the inner world of female characters in his novels. Woman plays a significant role in moulding the character and future course of man. She is equally substantial in male dominated world. Her work and fondness remains unparalleled. Even then she seems to be intentionally kept away from getting emotional attachment. In this paper an attempt is made to focus on the predicament of women characters. A sincere attempt is also made to point out Salman Rashdie's humanistic approach towards the development of women characters and their quest for identity in the hostile world. In his novels women characters are the victims of the oppressive traditional system and they suffer from a sense of alienation. Alienation is chiefly caused due to unfulfilled love, frustration, rootlessness, disillusionment, betrayal etc. In spite of their devotion and sincerity women are intentionally avoided by men. The role of women in life of man remains unobjectionable. In the select novel Midnight's Children Padma is the typical example of the victim of male dominant society. When Padma finds that she is being ignored, she feels disappointed and dejected. She struggles throughout her life to create her identity in the vast world.

INTRODUCTION

Human life is a complex phenomenon which unites the physical and the spiritual planes of human existence. The physical world embodies not only the mundane world outside but also the relations of the individual with its multifarious dimensions; while the spiritual world or psychological existence has to have its bearings on the mundane world. Thus, both, these worlds are united in a personality in the form of human sensibility. It is vital force joining the mundane and the ethereal. In the writings of Rushdie, these two sides of human existence are closely intermingled.

Rushdie equally concentrates on an emotional world of the female characters and his works show a profound understanding of feminine sensibility and psychology. He portrays the inner conflicts of his characters and also underlines their individuality and their quest for freedom. In his novels loneliness of the individual is one of the important themes. His female



characters suffer from a sense of alienation. Both alienation and affirmation are fundamental facts of life and these two terms are closely related to each other. Alienation always gives birth to disillusionment, desperation, fear-psychosis, frustration, inferiority complex and rootlessness. Enrich Fromen remarks regarding the effect of alienation and rootlessness of human being

“The alienation from oneself, from one’s fellow men and from nature, the awareness that life runs out of one’s hand like sand and that the one will die without having lived that live one’s midst that plenty and joyless”

(Zen, Enrich, Buddhism and Psycho-analysis P. 86).

Salman Rushdie’s Booker of Booker’s winning novel *Midnight’s Children* presents feminine sensibility through the medium of various characters which undergo bitter experiences in their lives. All the female characters in the novel are the strong personalities and Padma is one of them. She seems like a surrogate of feminist. She is the dominant character in the novel as she is the listener of Saleem Sinai’s autobiographical narration. She loves Saleem Sinai from the bottom of her heart and does everything for the sake of her love. She performs every kind of household duties for Saleem like cooking food and preparing bed for him. However, Saleem seems to be ignoring Padma’s devotion towards him. He never takes notice of her and does not express a word of appreciation about her and about her devotion.

On the other hand, Padma, while performing her duties, expects equal kind of emotional response from Saleem. When she finds that she is being ignored, she feels disappointed and dejected. She always loves Saleem and keeps him on right track as far as his writing is concerned. Regarding this Padma’s contribution can be immeasurable. She is the companion, nurse and at the top of it, she is a co-partner of the story of Saleem. On the other hand the protagonist, Saleem Sinai is aware that right from his birth his life is connected with women and his persona seems to have moulded by them. He confesses it and says:

“Women have always been the one’s to change my life: Mary Pereira, Evie Burns, Jamila Singer, Parvati -the-witch must answer for who I am; and the Widow, who I’m keeping for the end; and after the end, Padma, my goddess of dung. Women have fixed me all right.”(MC266)

Thus, it becomes quite clear that every woman performs an important role in the life of Saleem Sinai. Padma is not exception to it and as has been said earlier she takes care of Saleem from emotional and other points of view. However, even if Saleem is well aware of the fact that Padma loves him and takes care of him, he ignores her devotion consciously and remains stuck to his male -oriented ego. He never takes notice of her work and does not appreciate her. Due to this Padma is hurt within herself and feels disappointed. Padma, while performing her duties, expects equal kind of emotional response from Saleem and when she

finds that she is being ignored she becomes at first confused of Saleem's attitude towards her and later on she becomes nervous.

Padma is presented as a stereotype woman. In the novel she is active and optimistic for Saleem. She is always eager to do better for him. Though she is loyal and devoted, she is always ignored by Saleem. It seems that there is no meaning of her honesty and simplicity. Moreover, Padma is far away from reading and writing as she is shown illiterate. On the other hand, writing is the authority of Saleem as he is presented as the writer of his autobiography. Saleem asserts that he is well conscious of the populace, society, politics and culture of India. He gives less importance to cooking and preparing bed for sleeping. Here, Padma is ridiculed due to her illiteracy.

Another thing in the novel is that Padma is a rustic girl and very often Saleem humiliates her in a derogatory manner. She wants to marry with Saleem but Saleem who is an impotent always avoids marriage. However Padma is rejected for her needs. On the other hand, Padma's requirements are mainly emotional and to her, physical requirements are secondary. But it is beyond the comprehension of Saleem and he thinks that Padma's love towards him is due to her physical yearnings for which he is incapable and consequently he goes on avoiding her. Some time he abuses her in a very insulting manner. On this point Padma often gets panic and expresses herself in the following manner:

"So then I thought how to go back to this man who will not love me and only does some foolish writery? (Forgive, Saleem baba, but I must tell it truly. And love, to us women, is the greatest thing of all.)" (MC267)

But again, when Padma comes to know about Saleem's impotency, she brings some 'herbs of virility', suggested by a holy man. On this point narrator writes:

"Thou potent and lusty herb! Plant which Varuna had dug up for him by Gandharva! Give my Mr. Saleem thy power. Give heat like that of fire of Indra. Like the male antelope, O herb, thou hast all the force that is, that hast powers of Indra and the lusty force of beasts" (MC268).

Thus, the above statement indicates that she loves too much to Saleem. She cannot live without him. She wants to gain sympathy and love of him. However Saleem keeps the distance from her even if for his own causes which seem just to him.

In the novel Saleem Sinai belongs to Muslim community and Padma is a Hindu girl. Though they belong to different cultures, she decides to marry and live with him. It indicates that she is always loyal to him and her love is devotional. Though she has been humiliated and

denied, she wants to stay with him. It seems that for the sake of her love, she has surrendered herself in totality. Regarding the inner turmoil of Padma, Rushdie writes:

“Our Padma bibi, long-suffering tolerant, consoling, is beginning to behave exactly like a traditional Indian wife. (And I, with my distances and self – absorption, like a husband?) Of late, in spite of my stoic fatalism about the spreading cracks, I have smelled, on Padma’s breath, the dream of an alternative (...) future; ignoring the implacable finalities of inner fissures, she has begun to exude the bitter sweet fragrance of hope- for- marriage” (MC537).

While narrating the story, Saleem tells Padma about his past affairs with other women and his marriage with Parvati, who is one of the midnight children. In spite of this, she loves Saleem so passionately that she neglects his faults. If we consider her devotion and dedication towards Saleem, it seems that they are husband and wife or the lovers. However, at the end of the novel, it becomes quite clear that they are having neither these kinds of relations. Saleem cannot ignore Padma’s presence and he cannot endure her absences. He needs her help for his writing of story as a listener even if many times he ill-treats her. In the novel though Padma has been degraded and insulted, still he expects her to be loyal to him. Padma endures all this humiliation and says: “This love, mister, Padma is wailing, It will drive a woman to craziness”. (MC268)

Thus, it is quite clear that Padma wants to marry with Saleem and she is very eagerly waiting for his story to be finished. She has performed her role as a listener and caretaker of Saleem. She does not create her own identity. She does not have her own existence as a human being. There is no discussion about her family and history. She entirely surrenders herself to Saleem. When he talks about history and politics, her identity is denied:

“Padma began to cry. ‘I never said I didn’t believe, she wept. ‘Of course, every man must tell his story in his own true way; but...’” (MC293).

Thus, in the novel, Padma is avoided at every level. As a narrator, Saleem does not give her opportunity to tell her past and identity. She has been lost her past, present and family in the story of Saleem. The novel presents disgrace, humiliation, unjust treatment and exploitation of woman by the masculine strength through the medium of the characters in the novel. Padma leads such pitiable life only due to her gender. She is presented as a victim of illiteracy and ignorance. At the end of the novel it seems that Padma is subjected to male authority and it is she who desires to change her name from Padma Mongril to Naseem Sinai. It is Padma who does too much to him. Thus, she succeeds in securing her place among the male dominated society. She has been presented not only a mere character, a listener but also a co-narrator of Saleem’s story as it cannot be complete without Padma.

In the novel, Saleem Sinai is shown as a Muslim widower as he marries with Parvati earlier. It means that Padma is his second mistress who helps him to create his autobiographical work. In the novel Padma seems to be a 'submissive soul' who surrenders her entire life in the service of Saleem Sinai. However, she becomes nervous because she has been deprived of her womanly rights. In the male dominated culture, we find in general that the desires, hopes, expectations of woman are not considered positively. Woman has been regarded as a mere puppet in the hands of cruel system. On the condition of women, Sheila Mcleod in *Lawrence's Men and Women* observes:

"Women's work has long been downgraded and devaluated when compared to man's work, male muscular strength has been prized above the female capacity for physical endurance, men have been the owners of wealth and property, the wielders of authority, the holders of power, the achievers, the doers, the go-getters, while women have been barred from such apparently desirable positions or behaviours." ("The Passion to be Masculine" 18).

In the novel Saleem seems to be the staunch supporter of male-oriented society and Padma is the typical example of the victims of male dominant society. It is because of her so-called weak gender she has to suffer a lot. Actually Padma's demands are not for materialistic comforts. What she yearns for is mere emotional treatment from the side of her counterpart and for that she is ready to accept him with all his deficiencies. On the contrary she gets nothing. Her life is bleak and she is left to nothing. She is caught in such a situation that she has no option but to submit herself to the whims of Saleem. Here the women's sensibility is strongly exposed. When we leave the book, we, too, are entangled in the predicament of Padma. It keeps permanent impression on our mind and we are hopelessly groping for the solution in the dark. It makes us introspective.

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