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Subversive Women in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*

Abstract I: Discostandosi dalle prime critiche femministe che hanno etichettato l'opera di Salman Rushdie come misogina, questo articolo esamina la rappresentazione delle donne ne *I figli della mezzanotte* per mettere in luce come le principali protagoniste femminili rispondano in modo creativo e rimodellino le strutture sociali oppressive in cui vivono. Utilizzando il modello mutuale di Riane Eisler, l'articolo evidenzia le analogie fra il concetto indù di *Shakti* (potere femminile divino) e la partnership come alternativa efficace di relazione e incontro cooperativo alle norme sociali di dominio.

Abstract II: Moving from early feminist criticism that labelled Salman Rushdie's work as misogynistic, this article examines the portrayal of women *Midnight's Children* in order to show how they creatively respond and reshape the oppressive social structures they inhabit. By using Riane Eisler's partnership model, it will also highlight analogies between the Hindu concept of *Shakti* (divine feminine power) and mutuality as an effective alternative based on equalitarian relationships beyond the social norms of domination.

Keywords: Salman Rushdie, postcolonialism, gender norms, persona, partnership/domination, Hinduism.

1. Introduction

"Women have always been the ones to change my life" (Rushdie 2006: 266), states Saleem Sinai, the narrative voice of Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*. Born precisely at midnight on India's first Independence Day, Saleem sees himself as a literal embodiment of the nation. Since his life is meant to reflect the life of India, the novel presents the image of a country dominated by powerful women, creating a pervasive sense of danger and fear toward femininity. This aligns with Rushdie's controversial portrayal of women. Early feminist critics were "uncompromising in their view that his work consisted of a series of wholly misogynistic texts" (Horn 2014: 1), highlighting how, in his work, "women are invoked to prove a point about social injustices and inequities, and then effectively demeaned […] by the writing itself" (Cundy 1993: 17). On the other hand, many scholars have identified these depictions as part of a strategy aimed at undermining the oppressive nature of gender norms (Weickgenannt 2008). Rushdie's female characters have also been noted to be more negative and less central than their male counterparts: "Rushdie consistently asserts the centrality of men, who are usually positively coded, while consigning women to peripheral roles" (Horn 2014: 4).

In this article, I will argue that, by shifting the focus of analysis from the representation of these characters to their relationship with their own gender roles and relative cultural expectations, profound qualitative differences emerge from Rushdie's seemingly monolithic representation of women. Here my objective is twofold: firstly, to highlight how Rushdie's female characters in *Midnight's Children* always demonstrate a centrality of their own, taking the leading role in weaving the fabric of both individual and collective relationships; secondly, to investigate how the pressing social and patriarchal gender expectations placed upon these characters are either positively or negatively subverted by their distinctive agency and "oppositional creativity" (Hai 1999: 17). Finally, by focusing on the relational complexities displayed in the novel, I will also be able to identify a clear indication of an alternative, equalitarian[1] relational model to which all other relationships are measured, and to clarify how this model harkens back to traditional Hindu concepts of the divine feminine.

To evaluate the different relationship models at work in *Midnight's Children*, I will apply the formulations of socio-anthropologist Riane Eisler which highlight two main distinctive ways of structuring social configurations, partnership and domination, which emerge in all relationships throughout the novel:

> One result of re-examining human society from a gender-holistic perspective has been a new theory of cultural evolution. This theory, which I have called Cultural Transformation Theory, proposes that underlying the great surface diversity of human culture are two basic models of society. The first, which I call *dominator* model, is what is popularly termed either patriarchy or matriarchy – the *ranking* of one half of humanity over the other. The second, in which social relations are primarily based on the principle of *linking* rather than ranking, may best be described as partnership model. In this model – beginning with the most fundamental differences in our species, between male and female – diversity is not equated with either inferiority or superiority (Eisler 1987, xvii).

This framework allows me to map the relational landscape of the main female characters, which is mostly steeped into the 'dominator' model, "an operating social system characterized by an authoritarian and inequitable family, social, political, and economic structure of rigid hierarchies of domination with a high degree of fear, abuse, and violence" (Mercanti 2015: 8). This approach is further integrated by postcolonial and subaltern studies, such as those by Spivak and Chatterjee, as well as by feminist postcolonial scholars such as Rajeswari and Weickgenannt, which clarify the historical condition of the Indian woman and how she was placed at the intersection between a patriarchal traditionalist society and a modern nationalist ideal. Specifically, I will focus on three key characters: Naseen, Amina and Indira, who represent highly restrictive gender roles placed upon them along with the conflicts emerging from oppressive social expectations. They significantly elucidate three different responses to the 'dominator' structures in which they operate: subverting the

[1] "Equalitarian describes social relations in a partnership society where women and men (and "masculine" and "feminine") are accorded equal value" (Eisler 1987: 216).

existing structure, conforming to it or imposing a new one. At the same time they notably offer alternative solutions to their conflicts: the adoption of a partnership-based relationship model between men and women, as analogous in the Hindu concept of *Shakti*, the divine power personified as a goddess:

> In Hindu philosophy and theology *shakti* is understood to be the active dimension of the godhead, the divine power that underlies the godhead's ability to create the world and to display itself. Within the totality of the godhead, *shakti* is the complementary pole of the divine tendency toward quiescence and stillness. It is quite common, furthermore, to identify *shakti* with a female being, a goddess, and to identify the other pole with her male consort. The two poles are usually understood to be interdependent and to have relatively equal status in terms of the divine economy (Kinsley 1997: 133).

While Hindu mythology indicates that "all the female deities are called *Shaktis* of their male counterparts, the words *Shakti* and *Devi* are more particularly or even exclusively used to denote the *Shakti* of Shiva, the innumerable aspects of Parvati" (Swami Harshananda 2010: 94). In their unity, they are referred to as *Shiva-Shakti*[2]. This relationship is exemplified by the dynamic between the narrator, Saleem, and the listener, Padma: a partnership-based model existing in contrast to all other gender relations in the novel, founded on "the capacity to listen, relate, and connect to human beings and the environment" (Mercanti & Riem 2022: 4).

2.1. Naseem, the Reverend Mother

To better understand the motives behind Rushdie's depictions of women, it is crucial to examine the ideological construction of the ideal Indian woman at the turn of the 20th century. During this period, the burgeoning Indian nationalist movement began to create its own counter-narrative in opposition to the colonial one, aiming to generate a national identity outside of British colonial discourse. Unable to compete with Europeans in the male-dominated fields of politics and technology, Indian society turned to the domestic sphere, traditionally associated with women, to reclaim a more genuine identity outside of Eurocentric paradigms (Chatterjee 2010). Despite a pervasive patriarchal society, women found themselves "invested with the role of representing the essence of Indian culture and the core of the authentically Indian nation" (Weickgenannt 2008: 66), that is, to be custodians of the tradition and spirituality that defined the national character in contrast to the Western one[3]. However, this new female role had not developed organically but was ideologically driven and strictly delimited by the design of an androcentric society. Generally, women did

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[2] In the Indian Tantric tradition, the purpose of the sexual union (*maithuna*) "is to awaken the *kundalini* or divine energy, which is often explicitly identified with *shakti*, the creative power of the Goddess" (Eisler 1996: 27).

[3] "The identity of the country and the nation was often expressed and represented in terms of devotion to the goddess *Bharat Mata* or Mother India, who was inevitably a Hindu. The cult was imbued with moral fervour, and in the process religious, cultural and aesthetic aspects were politicised. The ideology of motherhood could be specifically claimed as their own the colonised and could help in emphasizing their selfhood" (Gupta 2001: 4291).

not take an active part in the contest between colonial and national identity, rather they were the sites in which such contests took place (Rajeswari 1993).

In *Midnight's Children*, the extreme consequences of the conflicting ideas of modernity and traditionalism are enacted by the character of the Reverend Mother, the grandmother of the protagonist. Before transforming herself into the matriarch of her family, Naseem Ghani was the spouse of Aadam Aziz, a character embodying the liberal ideals of the new Indian state. Despite his progressive views, Aadam immediately establishes a "dominator"[4] relationship with Naseem, ordering her to "forget about being a good Kashmiri girl [and to] start thinking about being a modern Indian woman" (Rushdie 2006: 39), against Naseem's wishes. By marrying the deeply conservative Naseem, Aadam attempts to reconnect with what he perceives as the true Indian identity. He seeks to preserve tradition while paradoxically expecting his wife to transcend it, positioning her as outdated compared to the modernity of his political ideals. These opposing forces escalate into violent outbursts, for example in the scene in which Aadam burns Naseem's veils, by which she observes the practice of *purdah*[5].

The "dominator family"[6] established by Aadam is quickly turned on its head: as his liberal ideals are not met and sectarianism takes over the country, his wife grows larger and stronger, while he becomes weaker. What follows is the hyperbolic consequence of Aadam's loss of power: instead of shifting into a paradigm of cooperation, the dominator model established by Aadam is taken over by Naseem. The characterisation of this structure is particularly notable, as the narrator describes their marriage as a space of bloody contest, a condition which brings about a degrading metamorphosis of both husband and wife: "a place of frequent and devastating warfare, under whose depredations the young girl behind the sheet and the gauche young Doctor turned rapidly into different, stranger beings" (Rushdie 2006: 38).

The subversion of the ideal Indian woman is reinforced by its mythical references, as the relationship between Naseem and Aadam contrasts sharply with the relationship between the divine couple of *Shiva-Shakti*. In this gendered representation of divinity, the male figure is incapable of expressing his power without the support of the female creative energy. While this relationship is rooted in harmony and mutuality, in the marriage between Aadam and Naseem these energies are drained from husband to wife, who gradually transforms into an imposing figure: "a prematurely old, wide woman, with two enormous moles like witch's nipple on her face; and she lived within an invisible fortress of her own making, an ironclad citadel of traditions and certainties" (Rushdie 2006: 47). In her new

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[4] "The domination configuration is found in repressive and violent societies […]. Despite their many differences, in all these societies the ideal norm in both family and state is top-down authoritarian rule, a high degree of abuse and violence, and rigid male dominance" (Eisler 2021: 1).

[5] Practice that was inaugurated by Muslims and later adopted by various Hindus, especially in India, and that involves the seclusion of women from public observation by means of concealing clothing (including the veil) and by the use of high-walled enclosures, screens, and curtains within the home. Encyclopedia Britannica, https://www.britannica.com/topic/purdah (consulted on 26/07/2024).

[6] "A family in which bonds between husband and wife […] are based on control and unquestioned authority" (Mercanti 2015: 8).

form, Naseem is able to impose her will not only on her family but on outsiders as well. Her image is reminiscent of the mythological Gorgon, as well as the absolute monarch: "she pierced her visitors with lidless eyes and stared them down. Their voices turned to stone; their hearts froze; and alone in a room with strange men, my grandmother sat in triumph, surrounded by downcast eyes" (Rushdie 2006: 51). While Naseem's grudge is primarily directed at her husband, her destructive power is so pervasive that it is expressed in all her actions, including those intended to nurture her daughters. Thus, her character seeps into the younger generation, born and raised into the rigid structure of the matriarchal[7] family:

> Reverend Mother doled out the curries and meatballs of intransigence, dishes imbued with the personality of their creator; Amina ate the fish salans of stubbornness and the birians of determination. And, although Mary's pickle has a partially counteractive effect […] the diet provided by the Reverend Mother filled Amina with a kind of rage (Rushdie 2006: 190).

In her role as Reverend Mother, Naseem takes absolute control of the domestic sphere, turning Aadam's boundaries against him. Building on this subversion of nationalistic discourse and its ideal of the self-sacrificing Indian woman, Rushdie's critique suggests that freedom cannot be constrained; it is either complete or illusory. The only justifiable limit to freedom, he seems to imply, is the mutual agreement between members of a free society. The distinction between this kind of freedom and the absolute anarchy represented by the narrator's rival, Shiva, mirrors the difference between mutually beneficial, equal relationships and those based on "hierarchies of domination" (Eisler 2021: 4) of one gender over the other.

2.2. Amina, the Wife

Contrary to the Reverend Mother, who has climbed the ladder of the domination structure of her family, her daughter Amina (formerly Mumtaz) genuinely strives to adhere to what she believes to be the proper role of the ideal wife. After a brief, unsuccessful marriage with Nadir Khan, Mumtaz quickly grasps the peril of deviating from socially accepted norms and is promptly remarried. Given this second opportunity, she fully embraces her new identity as the selfless, devout wife. This new conscience is enacted by the choice of accepting a new name, given to her by her new husband Ahmed Sinai, who renames her Amina "as if to cleanse her from her former marriage and reclaim her as virgin territory for himself" (Weickgenannt 2008). Despite this act of conscious self-offering, the authenticity of their marriage is continually questioned, as their relationship is not based on Amina's affection to her husband but on her dedication to the institution of marriage itself: "why had she married him? – For solace, for children" (Rushdie 2006: 86). Unable to genuinely love Ahmed "she gritted her teeth and set about putting herself straight" (Rushdie 2006: 86) and

[7] According to Eisler's formulation, matriarchy and patriarchy describe "two sides of the same coin" (Eisler 1987: 105); both fall under the model of domination, by their "ranking of one half of humanity over the other" (Eisler 1987, p. xvii).

yet, she cannot forget her former husband. Despite her best efforts, Amina's internal struggle illustrates how her deepest feelings remain beyond her control: "in my mother's opinion, a husband deserved unquestioning loyalty, and unreserved, full-hearted love. But there was a difficulty: Amina […] found she couldn't naturally provide Ahmed Sinai with these things" (Rushdie 2006: 87). Similarly, the mysterious power she shares with other women, though constrained by the patriarchal norms she has internalised, still manages to assert itself.

"Under the influence of painstaking magic so obscure that Amina was probably unaware of working it" (Rushdie 2006: 88), Ahmed undergoes a noticeable transformation, beginning to exhibit physical features reminiscent of Nadir. Just as her parents' struggles have reshaped them into different figures, the conflict within Amina's heart alters her new husband's appearance. Amina's inability to love her husband presents an insurmountable barrier in their marriage, which will never evolve into an equal, partnership-based relationship. Instead, Amina's efforts to conform to her ideal will ultimately break her spirit, leaving her a shadow of herself, consumed by guilt for failing "to save his husband from the pink chitties of alcoholism, for the Brass Monkey's untamed, unfeminine ways, and for the size of her only son's nose" (Rushdie 2006: 218). Her deepest sense of guilt, however, stems from her continued affection towards Nadir. Over the years, despite her guilt building up, her agency and nurturing power continue to shine through, as the takes on a sort of confessor role for her neighbourhoods:

> Amina had become one of those rare people who take the burdens of the world upon their own backs; she began to exude the magnetism of the willingly guilty; and from then on everyone who came into contact with her felt the most powerful of urges to confess their own, private guilts […]. They succumbed to my mother's powers (Rushdie 2006: 218).

This effort, however, is followed by a debilitating accumulation of guilt, which manifests as fog, clouding her vision and impairing her eyesight. The final blow to her character comes when she is forced to temporarily leave Ahmed, who has descended into alcoholism. Confronted with these circumstances, Amina becomes convinced that her life has lost its meaning, having failed to fulfil the duties of her role:

> The Brass Monkey and I were helpless observers, in those days, of my wilting mother. She, who had always been assiduous in the heat, had begun to wither in the northern cold. Deprived of two husbands, she was also deprived (in her own eyes) of meaning (Rushdie 2006: 398).

Significantly, Rushdie's portrayal of this moment is depicted through the principles associated with cold and heat, linking them with the loss of meaning experienced by Amina. This symbolism is reminiscent of the mythical figure of Sita, the divine wife of Rama and the ideal spouse model, who, in her selfless devotion and fidelity, "nourishes an inner heat that both purifies her and provides her with a destructive weapon that can be used against those who might threaten her purity" (Kinsley 1997: 71). Instead of nourishing this inner

power, Amina enacts a deliberate negation of the Self in favour of the external demands of social narratives, by trying to suppress those profound forces that cannot be constrained by conscious effort. Unable to establish a mutual relationship with her second husband, her suppressed energies – her *Shakti* – will ultimately lead to an implosion of her personality into an incurable depressive state.

2.3. Indira, the Widow

While Naseem has outcompeted her husband to the top of the domination structure of her family, and Amina has internalised it, the character of Indira Gandhi is the one who strives to impose her own domination structure on the whole nation of India. Her real-life counterpart is the ultimate target for Rushdie's critique, who accuses her of having destroyed all hopes for a liberal India, in favour of an authoritarian government centred on herself and her family. Rushdie's critique is even more powerful due to the way it is delivered – through the demonisation of the Widow's character. To achieve this, Rushdie taps into the ambivalent nature of widowhood in Indian culture.

Although celibacy after the husband's death constitutes the "nonexceptional fate of widows" (Spivak 1988: 302), Rushdie plays on fame of the practice of *sati*, the sacrifice of the widow on her husband's funeral pyre, to conjure images of death, austerity and cruelty. While it is important to highlight how the practice was not widespread and how its appropriateness has been debated in brahmin culture since the Puranic era (Spivak 1988), the British debate around its abolition has made the image of the Indian widow sacrifice far more common than the ritual itself, at the same time serving the colonial discourse as further confirmation of the necessity of Western presence to stop such barbarism: "the powerful negative connotations of Hindu widowhood, viewed in the popular imagination not merely as the misfortune of women but as their destruction of the male" (Rajeswari 1993: 112), in turn build upon the duty of the ideal wife to attend to her husband's health and safety. This is combined with Rushdie's figure of the witch, creating a monstrous villain that haunts Saleem's dreams: "green and black the Widow's hair and clutching hand […] green and black her hand is green her nails black as black" (Rushdie 2006: 589).

Just as Rushdie uses widespread cultural imagery to construct the character of the Widow, so does Indira herself. Founding herself at the centre of a complex network of social and symbolic implications, she establishes an imposing presence in the nation's collective imagination, one that stratifies all aspects of womanhood. She is simultaneously the only daughter of Nehru, a father of the nation; the wife and later widow of Feroze, a renowned freedom fighter; and the mother of Rajiv, who would eventually become Prime Minister himself. Above all, Indira aspires to be a "Mother of the Nation" (Rushdie 2006: 588), reshaping it by her will. In this sense, she "was not only Prime Minister of India but also aspired to be *Devi*, the Mother-goddess in her most terrible aspect, possessor of the *Shakti* of the gods" (Rushdie 2006: 612). All of this is achieved through the power of discourse, a key point in Rushdie's critique, as Indira does not need to impose her role. Instead, she capitalises on the pre-existing web of symbolisms around the idea of womanhood in India:

> The point to be made here is not that Indira Gandhi went about proclaiming herself as *Devi* the Mother goddess, but rather that her swift and cruel actions during the Emergency were perceived to be analogous with the actions of *Devi*, and this was a role that "Mother Indira" did not repudiate (Price 1994: 98).

A *Devi* without a consort, however, is in clear contrast with the balance and mutuality expressed by the divine unity of *Shiva-Shakti*, and thus the Widow's unchecked power degenerates into authoritarian government and extreme policies. As in other domination systems, which "equate difference […] with superiority or inferiority" (Eisler 2021: 7), her objective is to impose her own national narrative by silencing the authentic diversity of the nation, as represented by the titular Midnight's Children and by the hopes for a secular democracy brought about by Independence. Thus, her mass sterilisation program is framed by Saleem as "sperectomy: the draining-out of hope" (Rushdie 2006: 611).

Driven by "a lust for meaning as profound as [Saleem's]", the clash between the Widow and the narrative voice is inevitable, as they are both "competitors for centrality" (Rushdie 2006: 587) in the history of their country. Although Salmeen's deep-rooted conviction of being the mirror of the nation is similar to the Widow's, the distinct pattern of partnership and domination emerges clearly when considering their strategies: while Saleem clearly states his intentions and admits to errors and manipulations in his alternative version of history, his narrative is intended to "increase the sum of what is possible to think" (Rushdie 2010: 15) and is not imposed on anyone else. On the contrary, the nationalistic narrative of the Widow is imposed on the population by means of incarcerations, brutality and persecution. Most importantly, it is absolute, as it does not admit to any alternative as "those who would be gods fear no one so much as other potential deities" (Rushdie 2006: 612).

3. Saleem and Padma, the Partnership Couple

Among all the female characters in *Midnight's Children*, which mostly serve to subvert or expose the violence of gender roles in a 'dominator' patriarchal society, the character of Padma is instead based on a partnership model, "an operating social system characterized by mutual respect, care, trust, and equal valuing of the male and female halves of humanity, with a low degree of fear, abuse, and violence" (Mercanti 2015: 24). The relationship between her and Saleem is the closest we get to the image of the divine couple of *Shiva-Shakti*, not only because Saleem is not imposing any domination hierarchy on Padma or vice versa, but also because both parts are equally engaged in the creative act of narrative – that is, the creation of the world of narrative. Despite his own desire to record his life, Saleem' narrative is entirely fuelled by Padma's awe and curiosity, who in turn responds, objects and counterbalances Saleem's sprawling writing. While he clearly states to be "driven by Padma" (Rushdie 2006: 143) in continuing his work, this dynamic is even clearer when Padma temporary leaves him at the midpoint of the novel: "Padma has not returned […] and in her absence, my certainties are falling apart" (Rushdie 2006: 229). Equally essential to this creative endeavour, both halves of the coupled are also nurtured and shaped by it, as they engage in a dialogical dialogue (Panikkar 2007) capable of shaping the listener but, most importantly, the narrator, whose whole life has been characterised by a mistrust of

women: "certainly Padma is leaking into me" (Rushdie 2006: 45). Although fundamentally positive, this relationship is not unrealistically devoid of conflict: while Padma teases Saleem about the effects of his sterilisation ("'What good are you, little princeling, […] as a lover?'", Rushdie 2006: 166), Saleem remarks on "her ignorance and superstition" (Rushdie 2006: 206). Even then, he cannot deny her fundamental role as recipient of his story, which can only make sense as long as she will listen to it – "Padma would believe it; Padma would know what I mean!" (Rushdie 2006: 218) – and in time admits to the blossoming of true affection, upholding her as a "lotus-goddess" (Rushdie 2006: 206).

In Tantric tradition, the divine principle usually refers to the god Shiva, and this unity takes the form of *Shiva-Shakti*: "Shiva, the Absolute, and *Shakti*, the creative Power, being eternally united like word and its meaning – one cannot be thought of without the other" (Swami Samarpanananda 2010: 273). While this seems to evoke the characters of Shiva and Parvati, one must remember that *Shakti* is commonly understood to be a principle and a role, which is identified with different deities depending on the cult in question:

> In the Hindu mythological literature […] this energy is always pictured as a female deity, the *Devi*, as the consort of its counterpart male deity. Each member of the Trinity has his *Shakti* or *Devi* as his consort: Sarasvati of Brahma, Laksmi of Visnu and Parvati of Siva (Swami Harshananda 2010: 78).

In this light, the novel seems to indicate that the true representation of the divine relationship is that between Saleem and Padma, in their role as the creators operating from the outer framework of the narrative. On the contrary, the relationship between Shiva and Parvati appears as an imperfect manifestation, immersed in the world of the narrative. This observation is based on the nature of their relationship, which is intended as an act of revenge against Saleem, initiated by a scorned Parvati. It is also important to highlight how the character of Shiva is entirely oriented towards destruction and materialism:

> 'What *purpose*, man? What thing in the whole sister-sleeping world got reason, yara? […] you got to get what you can, do what you can with it, and then you got to die. That's reason, rich-boy' (Rushdie 2006: 306).

Deeply rooted in a 'dominator' paradigm, Shiva's actions demonstrate that he does not represent the entirety of the divinity, whose power of dissolution is not an end. Rather, it is aimed at transformation, rebirth, and re-creation, and while Shiva does participate in the creation of a new generation by impregnating all the women he encounters, "he deserted the bedrooms of all who bore his children" (Rushdie 2006: 571). Conversely, it is Saleem that takes on the responsibility of Shiva's biological child, as well the burden of creation, that he successfully carries out in conjunction with Padma. While Saleem will be denied public recognition and Shiva will become a decorated war hero, he and Padma will find a deeper purpose in each other through their exercise of fiction and imagination, which, according to Rushdie's own formulations, is the true "agent of synthesis or transformation" (Grant 2012: 2).

4. Conclusion

Starting from Rushdie's inequitable portrayal of female characters, I intentionally moved away from a mere analysis of the relational dynamics surrounding them, including their own relationships with their gender roles and consequent social expectations, in order to highlight new emerging relational complexities. By applying the theoretical framework of Riane Eisler's partnership/domination model, Rushdie's novel is further appreciated through playing out the extreme consequences of oppressive social norms. In examining the key characters of Naseem, Amina and Indira, three distinct approaches to the domination structures surrounding these women have emerged. While Naseem has subverted his husband's authority and has turned into a matriarch, her daughter Amina has completely internalised this model, spending her life in anguish and guilt. On the other hand, Indira has successfully leveraged her family's prestige to impose a charismatic, authoritarian public figure.

As these characters demonstrate, the struggles placed upon them allow for the exercising of their distinct agency and creativity, positing them at the center of complex relational dynamics that shape families and nations. This in contrast to the existing literature on the topic (Spivak 1990; Ahmad 1991; Grewal 1994), which mainly deemed Rushdie's female characters to be peripheral and passive. Playing by hyperbole, Rushdie has instead designed his narrative to display the punishment of those who wished to impose new rules on women, while claiming the merits of their liberation in the wake of India's Independence. This punishment is represented by a reversal of roles, by which the dominator male inevitably discovers that the freedom he believed he granted cannot be restrained or withdrawn. Such is the case with Aadam Aziz, consumed by his wife, and Ahmed Sinai, who, despite trying to claim Amina as his exclusive property, will never be genuinely loved by her. In the case of Indira Gandhi, the whole nation will suffer the consequences of her authoritarian power.

Despite all these different responses to their environment, the relational model around these characters never changes, the domination structure being always reaffirmed, bearing no positive outcomes but prolonged, sometimes intergenerational, suffering. By discussing these relationships with recurring analogies to the sacred notion of *Shakti*, I have highlighted how the profound mythological intuition of the primordial harmony between the sexes offers the possibility of a different relational model based on the creative, harmonious, equalitarian relationships. Having examined the different interactions between these key characters and their relationship dynamics, I identify Saleem and Padma as the embodiment of the divine couple. They oversee and play around with the creation of the narrative world, standing as an example of a relational model capable of resolving all conflicts thus far explored and mutually nurturing both their relationship and the larger communities to which they belong.

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