

**“THE GROUND BENEATH HER FEET”: A STUDY ON THE
PORTRAYAL OF WOMEN IN RELATION TO POWER IN SELECTED
NOVELS OF SALMAN RUSHDIE**

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Though Salman Rushdie’s novels are read as British Literature, in his novels he usually presents ‘Eastern’ characters in both colonial and postcolonial settings. In all these contexts he examines gender identities of his characters and the way they are related to the cultural and national phenomena. “Rushdie transforms biography into fiction”, says D.C.R.A.Goonetilleke in his book *Salman Rushdie*. Yes, he does. In real or imaginary cities Rushdie transforms facts into fiction or *vice versa*. Gender issues and women are central to his novels, and he emphasizes on gender based power. Though his major intention is not to present female types in his fiction, he portrays women in a way that helps to bring out his themes. His depiction of women in relation to power is rather interesting as he presents the grounds on which women lose and gain power and autonomy.

We encounter many women in his novels who are engaged in male activities and despise their own gender for being extremely vulnerable and ‘stupid’. For instance Arjumand Harappa (in *Shame*) wears her father’s clothes as she believes that men’s clothes would grant her the access to power that cannot be reached in women’s clothes. Rushdie also presents different types of women who gain power through different means; through beauty, sorcery, innocence, intelligence etc. Some sacrifice their innocence and purity for power. Mohini, the whore in *The Enchantress of Florence* determines to carry on her life as a prostitute as it makes her more powerful than other women.

“Rushdie subverts feminism”, says Goonetilleke. This statement is justified by the way Rushdie depicts women. He sometimes seems to undermine female power and authority by presenting women as rather stupid characters who overly exercise power and consequently, lose their power. Men are mostly depicted as creators and discoverers of female power. They mend and undo women’s power. Once unobserved by men, their power and charms diminish. Thus, many critics claim Rushdie to be misogynic. These women’s nature and level of power vary. Except for a few female characters, the majority of women are portrayed as carriers of destructive (evil/monstrous) powers; they use power for the selfish motive of elevating their position and status. Some are born powerful. Others gain power gradually over time; they sow seeds of love or hatred and reap power. Many oppressed women take on power to avenge the oppressor. Anyhow, only a few women retain their powers. Not that they all fail in their mission of acquiring power; some succeed whereas the majority miserably fail and end up in a position worse than their previous.

On the surface level, Rushdie’s depiction of women’s power seems to be quite chauvinistic as many women fail to fulfill their whims and fancies. But, a close analysis would reveal that there are instances Rushdie admits that women are capable of subverting certain values and concepts that pave the way for patriarchy. This is proven, despite all the contradictory facts, when Rushdie eventually states that women are like water (“Mother Ocean”). “Without water we are nothing. Even an emperor, denied water, would swiftly turn to dust. Water is the real monarch and we are still its slaves”, says Rushdie in his novel *The Enchantress of Florence*.