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## A Feminist Study of Salman Rushdie's *Enchantress of Florence*

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### Abstract:

In *The Enchantress of Florence* (2008), the story begins with the Mughal past of India, during the reign of Akbar when a traveller comes to the king's court and wants to share a secret with the king. The traveller's own history is episodic spanning many delocirs into exotic lands and regimes and his secret even more complicated. It is about a woman endowed with magical powers that holds men captive, ensnares them and so captivates their imaginary that they become her willing slaves. Thus the main theme of the novel revolves around sex and eroticism. The traveller to the Emperor Akbar's court claims to be his long lost relative who was the son of Qara Koz, the exiled sister of Babur. Akbar's grandfather. She had married an Italian from Florence. This is because of the intent of the author to link the East with the West. One of the characters in the novel states this thematic thrust very clearly when he says. "The curse of the human race is not that we are so different from one another, but that we are so alike." Basically, the novel celebrates a kind of a vanished world that never was inter-relating the real with the unreal.

**Key Words:** Travel, Imaginary, Eroticism, Thematic thrust.

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As Martin McQuillan puts it: The plot of the novel concerns the unfolding of a double plot, a story about storytelling and the intrigue it engenders. A blonde-haired traveller, Niccolo Vespucci, arrives at the court of the Grand Mughal, Emperor Akbar, determined to tell the tale of a secret so astonishing that it could shake the dynasty itself (105). The novel unfolds as Vespucci, the self-proclaimed Mogor dell'Amore, tells his story to the Mughal. constantly interrupted by the manoeuvring of the court, the politics of the empire and the civil culture of the city. As the novel progresses we flip between two worlds and two stories that of the Mughal Empire, the present of Vespucci and Akbar and that of Florence under the Medicis, the past of three friends whose history leads back to the Mughal present via the introduction of a third, new world. In the telling of this serpentine tale, the importance of the theatrical and dashing Vespucci as a character recedes as a story of Qara Koz, the lost Mughal princess, who he believes to be his mother, is told. The novel flips to be no longer Vespucci's story but the story of Qara Koz and Akbar, who must in the end, decide

whether Vespucci's narrative is true or false. At the end, Vespucci slips away and Akbar is left in a world of doubt and recrimination, uncertain as to what remains at the end of this narrative marathon. (Eagleston and McQuillan, 87)

So the traveller, after plundering a Scottish lord's pirate ship, reaches Sikri, the capital city of Akbar, by the golden lake. He is Mogor dell'Amore who risks his life to get into the coterie of the Emperor. His secret is his relationship to the king via Qara Koz- eventually named Angelica. She had in her time become the dream of everyman living variously as princess, slave and witch. She lives with her servant girl called the Mirror, who shares everything with her mistress, even her bed partners, Rushdie has fantasised her as the ideal mistress and makes Akbar imagine her in the incarnation of Jodha Akbar daydreams of a perfect wife, a perfect lover and all these dream qualities are possessed by Qara Koz or Angelica or the Enchantress. As the story progresses we hear it from various storytellers, travellers and adventurers and moves from the Mughal and Ottoman Empires to Renaissance Florence.

Qara Koz is used to bridge two continents and two cultures. She resists conventional expectations but is endowed with a social dynamism of her own. It can be said that what Rushdie is doing here is to produce a 'gendered discourse' that plays upon both sexuality and hybridity. Despite the fact that Rushdie cannot be called a 'feminist' in the way we relate to the term, his novels are flooded with women characters who dominate the discourse and make things happen the way they happen.

The story told by the foreigner was confirmed by Hamida Bano and Gulbandan Begum. Earlier Babar was known as beaver and Wormwood as Shaibani Khan. Babar's sister Khanzada was captured by Shaibani after his defeat by that Warlord at Samarkand and a decade later Shaibani was defeated by Shah Ismail of Persia. When the princess Khanzada was captured by Shabani, the little princess and her maid-servant known as the Mirror were also captured and when Khanzada was rescued by Shah Ismail and sent home to Babar's court the little princess and the Mirror remained in Persia. The hidden princess didn't return with Khanzada because she was in love with a foreigner so she defied her brother, the King and scorned his court Babar in his fury cast his younger sibling (sister) out of history of his Royal family and her name was never used by anybody in the whole realm Khanzada Begum loved her sister but she obeyed the instructions very carefully and sincerely. "And slowly the memory of the hidden princess and her Mirror faded." (239)

The foreigner continued the story, the Persian King in turn was defeated by the Osmanali or Ottaman. Sultan. In the end the princess reached Italy in the company of a mighty warrior Argalia. The princess name was Qara Koz, meaning Black Eyes, "on account of the extraordinary power of those orbs to bewitch all upon whom they gazed (151). She was a possessor of superhuman powers. Even Khanzada, her half-sister had fallen under the younger girl's spell. Wormwood Khan had heard of the beauty of Babar's elder sister Khanzada Begum. He sent a message to Babar that if Khanzada was surrendered to him he would not attack Babar and his family. "Babar had no choice but to accept, and Khanzada had no choice but to accept Babar's choice. Thus she became a sacrificial offering human booty, a living pawn like the slave girls of Akbar's

pachisi court."(155) when she was going to sacrifice her life, she chose Lady Black Eyes to accompany her. Nobody in the family could decide whether she spoke out of malice or love because Khanzada always dealt with her with both emotions. Being a little child Qara Koz was frightened because if her sister Khanzada became the Wormwood Khan's prisoner, she would be her sister's prisoner.

The foreigner continued the story that there were three friends Antonina Argalia, Niccolo il Machia and Ago Vespucci in Florence. Simonetta Cattaneo, the most beautiful lady in Florence was married to Ago's cousin Marco Vespucci, but he had to share her with the whole town, because such a beauty was a public resource. She was endowed with enchantment power and could affect anyone. She would turn men into whatever she wanted them to be, gods or lap dogs or little barrels or footstools or, of course, lovers. She could have ordered boys to die to prove their love for her and they would have done so gladly, but she was too good-natured for that, and never used her immense powers for ill. (168-169)

The effect of her enchantment was so great that people started praying to her in church. The whole city was under her influence but Marco Vespucci, her husband regarded her as a whore who was available for everyone. Soon Simonetta fell sick and died. The city of Florence had lost its enchantress but they believed that after the death of Simonetta, the first enchantress of Florence, the second enchantress would arrive certainly. According to ancient customs, the city of wealthy traders was also a city of fabulous whores. Il Machia and Ago occasionally there to take pleasure in the company of whores. In Fatehpur Sikri, Akbar was informed of the rapid rise of the sex workers. The Emperor was himself of the opinion that for a woman to please a man, it is necessary that she should know how to sing, dancing and playing a musical instrument. She should be perfect in every matter to please her male counterpart.

And she should be able to act, and to lay on theatrical shows, and she should be quick and sure in her hands, and be able to cook and make lemonade or sherbet, and wear jewels, and bind a man's turban. And she should of course know magic. A woman who knows these few things is almost the equal of any ignorant brute of a man, (195)

The foreigner continued his tale that there were three friends Niccolo'il Machia, Agostino Vespucci and Antonino Argalia. Their boyhood world was a magic world. Then Argalia's parents died of plague. He left to seek his fortune and his friends never saw him again. He faced many troubles in his adventurous life. One of the slave girls told him that how the cadets in the prison were inspected naked on arrival in Stamboul, their names were taken from them and given other names to indicate their slavery status in the world. The Sultan had given to Argalia the gift of an enslaved beauty, she was erased, and she was just a living corpse. She introduced herself before Argalia as Angelique, the daughter of Jacques Coeur of Bourges, merchant of Montpellier. While she was trading with her family, she was abducted by pirates and sold to the Sultan of Stamboul into slavery. Argalia pitied her for her bad luck, she was sold twice by Barbary pirates, once from the French and second time from the Turks. She had been assaulted by many men, though she belonged to an aristocratic family. "Who knew what assaults she had been subjected to, how many men had had her, or what she would remember of such matters and even now she was not free. She looked as refined as any aristocrat but she was just a girl in a house of pleasure."(238)

In terms of the novel, Angelique acts as a plot device, another pocket within a pocket, by which to progress the story that connects the two worlds of the Mughal and the Medicis, traded and exchanged as the daughter of a merchant, pirated and copied. She shares the name taken by Qara Koz and her Mirror as they cross over into Europe, Angelica: non-human but not quite divine, of the Paradiso promised by Beatrice, the first enchantress of Florence. (Eagleston and McQuillan, 91)

Mogor dell'Amore continued the story that when the great warrior Argalia met the immortal beauty Qara Koz, a story began. As the story of hidden princess began to spread throughout the city of Sikri people began to imagine her in their dream, they thought of her tragic life. Her separation from her family caused her great pain and it was her elder sister Kkanzada's fault which changed her life forever. Many female characters in the Mughal empire began to rethink about her, old princess Gulbadan regarded her as a free-spirited adventurer who took pleasure in

the company of the most beautiful man. For Skeleton (whore), Qara Koz was the personification of female sexuality. And Jodha Bai, the imaginary queen of Akbar, thinks of her as her rival, whom she might not be able to withstand. Infact Qara Koz began to dominate all people's self. "Like Qara Koz and her Mirror, each world reflects the other but not as equal. They are alike in beauty but not the same, one slightly imperfect in relation to the other, not a pure mimesis but an architecture of difference in which the memory palace is the tain of the mirror, that which in its opacity makes reflections possible". (Eaglestone and McQuillan,91)

Plainly Lady Black Eyes was becoming all things to all people, an exemplar, a lover, an antagonist, a muse; in her absence she was being used as one of those vessels into which human beings pour their own preferences, abhorences, prejudices idiosyncrasies, secrets, misgivings and joys, their unrealized selves, their shadows, their innocence and guilt, their doubts and certainties, their most generous and also most grudging response to their passage through the world. (251-252)

Qara Koz had towering personality and tantalising beauty, she influenced men by her magical beauty though she could not recognise her inner force of enchantments. She was twenty-one years old and had not conceived a child. Though she had abandoned everything for him, her sister, brother and her family but there was something wandering in her, the unrooted thing in personality. "If a woman turned so easily from one allegiance she might just as readily turn away from the next."(274) She was his addiction and his master, she dominated him and he did all things as if he were her slave or a child. Qara Koz, an ambitious lady, was the master of her own life. She was a lady who could make any man mad in love. But herself being cracked under the weight of her isolation and loss. When she refused to return to the Mughal court with her sister Khanzada, She had learned that not only a woman could choose her own road, "but that such choice had consequences that could not be erased from the record." (323) She had made her choice of not returning to her native home and for that decision she had no regrets, but she suffered the black terror, the terror of loneliness. She had learnt many languages of the world, perfected the art of

enchantment, but she was without her family, without any ancestors, "without any of the consolations of remaining within one's allotted frontiers, inside her mother tongue and in her brother's care." (323) It was the bright time of Qara Koz. but the darkness was waiting to visit in her life. As Angelica arrived in the city of Florence, she was considered as a goddess of love and guardian of the public. But after some time Qara Koz showed signs of physical and spiritual weakness. It was the Mirror who first noticed that lackness in her. Argalia, her lover, also noticed it during their love romance, as she started turning away from his advances, asking the Mirror to please him instead.

After Giuliano de Medici's death Lorenzo de Medici became the ruler of Florence and things began to change. Qara Koz was twenty-eight years old, but she was barren. She had not given Argalia a son. Lorenzo conspired against Argalia to be killed in the battlefield. After knowing Lorenzo's plan, the Mirror and the princess decided to escape from Florence, to leave one life and find the next. But they would not leave until Argalia came home alive. She had no power over life and death but trusted the power of love. Meanwhile Lorenzo got sick. There was a rumor that Qara Koz bewitched him which caused his death. The princess covered a short journey from enchantress to witch. Few days earlier she had been the city's saint but now she was a witch to the mob who had killed their Duke. The Mirror suggested she should escape but she was determined to wait for her husband's arrival. And he arrived and promised her to save her life from the mob outside the palace. Qara Koz went away with the Mirror leaving Argalia forever. When Ago Vespucci offered himself to flee with them into an unknown future, Qara Koz offered her life and the Mirror to him in return. "Qara Koz survives and moves around the world through a chain of sacrifice and exchange, swapping the protection of one great man for another, giving up the life of her husband and her own life as a consort whenever a survivor's choice has to be made she becomes sacrificial a offering" (Eaglestone and McQuillan 96) Akbar was not a perfect man but he desired Jodha as his perfect woman, companion and masterpiece of creation. But with the arrival of Qara Koz in his imagination, Jodha had not the power to interrupt his imagination. A different woman visited him instead, it was Qara Koz,

Lady Black Eyes. He was lured by her nostalgic gravity, which would drag him backwards in time and in every way. "She would entice him into the delirium of an impossible love and he would sink into her and away from the world of law and action and majesty and destiny" (389)

Martin McQuillan opines, "Storytelling in this novel is then a form of enchantment, both a bewitching and a sense of wonder or delight. The enchantment of Akbar leaves him spellbound and incapable of reason. As with the rest of this novel, it is only possible to be enchanted in one of two ways: either by stories or by love" (Eaglestone and McQuillan, 94)

Everyone requested Jodha to save the king from the apparition of the so-called hidden princess, Qara Koz. They wished that Jodha should use all her powers over Akbar so that he could "be rescued from his hexed condition-from his lust for this hell-demon in female form." (406) They promised Jodha to assist her by teaching her every means so that she could retain her power over the emperor and the she-devil's victory over the master of Fatehpur Sikri might be stopped. But the imaginary queen Jodhabai was replaced by the phantom of Sara Koz, as the emperor no longer needed her. Qara Koz was his new companion. She became very popular in the public and was called people's princess whereas Jodha had always been a distant queen. Akbar admired the princess journey from the West to the East. "Her journey across the Ocean Sea was a kind of dying, a death before death, because death too was a sailing away from the unknown into the unknown. She had sailed away into unreality, into a world of fantasy which men were still dreaming into being." (418)

The hidden princess, Qara koz, Lady Black Eyes, came to sit beside Akbar. It was the beginning of a new day. The past was meaningless to Akbar, the emperor. "He had raised her from the dead and granted her the freedom of the living, had freed her to choose and be chosen, and she had chosen him." (442) She, Qara Koz, told him "I have come home after all. You have allowed me to return, and so here I am at my journey's end. And, now, shelter of the world, I am yours" (442-43). "Akabar, the all-powerful and the bewitched, through the exercise of his will, and beyond all reason, conjures into being Qara Koz and takes her as his queen" (Eaglestone and McQuillan, 94). Analyzing

female characters in Rushdie's novel, Uma Parameswaran concludes: "Salman Rushdie is an ardent crusader of women's rights and strengths. He delineates the freedoms and oppressions faced by women in their traditional roles, and portrays a diversity of strong women who make their own space, and reach out for controlling their own destinies sometimes despite and sometimes because of traditional codes of conduct (Parameswaran, 109). Aijaz Ahmad also focuses in his own way: The general structure of Rushdie's representation of women, that in real life many women have doubtless been driven to madness, violence, phobia, dementia. But women are not, in any fundamental sense, mere victims of history, much more centrally, women have survived against very heavy odds, and they have produced history" (Ahmad, 150).

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