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## **Social Castration of Munia, a Third-world Woman, in Geetanjali Shree's 'The Reflection'**

**Md. Maruf Ul Alam, M.A.**



Geetanjali Shree

Courtesy: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Geetanjali\\_Shree](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Geetanjali_Shree)

### **Focus of Geetanjali Shree's "The Reflection"**

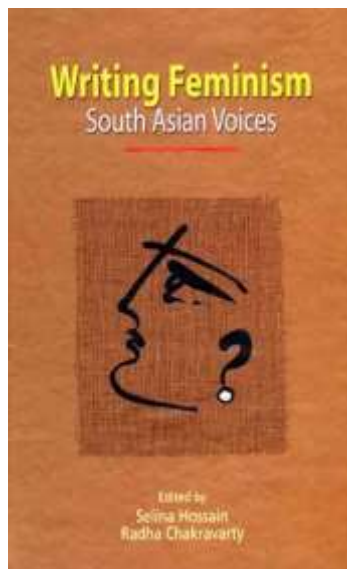
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Geetanjali Shree is a Hindi novelist and short story writer. She has written four novels and published two collections of short stories. Munia is the central character in her short story 'The Reflection' which was originally written in Hindi and was translated later in English by the author. The story has been included in *Writing Feminism: South Asian Voices* edited by Selina Hossain and Radha Chakravorty. The story deals mainly with 'social castration' of Munia in postcolonial patriarchal society. We notice Munia's struggle for establishing her individual identity. Her husband Rahul, a typical representative of postcolonial patriarchy, does not allow her to work outside. He wants to confine her indoors. He transforms her into a mere tool for his sexual pleasure. He denies her financial, sexual and psychological freedom.



<http://www.newslinemagazine.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/12/Feminism12-10.jpg>

### **Castration Complex**

What is 'castration complex'?

A central concept in psychoanalysis, the castration complex occurs during the pre-oedipal stage of infantile development and is closely connected to the oedipal complex which follows and signals its resolution. It refers to the child's acknowledgement of castration and therefore the supremacy of the phallus. According to Freud, 'castration' functions differently for girls and boys: the girl must accept her absolute inferiority because she lacks a penis, while the boy must

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accept his relative inferiority, the father's castrating injunction against his incestuous desire for the mother, and the possible loss of his organ. (Andermahr 31)

### **A Counter Argument**

Kate Millet expressed sharp opposition to this Freudian view of 'castration' in her *Sexual Politics*. Millet says,

As the Freudian understanding of female personality is based upon the idea of 'penis envy', it requires an elaborate, and often repetitious, exposition, beginning with the theory of 'penis envy', the definition of the female is negative—what she is is the result of the fact that she is not a male and 'lacks' a penis.... The answer would seem to lie in the condition of patriarchal society and the inferior position of women in this society. But Freud did not choose to pursue such a line of reasoning preferring instead an etiology of childhood experience based upon the biological fact of anatomical differences. (Millet, 179-180)

### **A Social, not a Biological Problem – Social Castration**

So 'castration' can be seen as a social phenomenon rather than a biological one. Women are marginalized entities in postcolonial third-world patriarchy.

In so far as women are defined as marginal by patriarchy, their struggle can be theorized in the same way as any other struggle against a centralized power structure. (Moi, 163)

'Social Castration' (Barry, 135) in postcolonial society is a kind of denial of female desires by postcolonial patriarchy. Assuming that Munia in 'The Reflection' is a third-world woman, let us try to define 'third-world'.

'Third-world' commonly refers to those states in Africa, Asia and Latin America which called themselves 'non-aligned', that is to say, affiliated with neither the western (capitalist) nor the eastern (communist) power blocks. (Eagleton, 396-397)

## **Munia and Her Destination**

Here, Munia is an Indian Woman and India can be seen as a third-world country according to the above definition. In a postcolonial South Asian society a girl does not know what her destination is.

Marriage of Munia with Rahul is the social reason for her social castration. “The marriage ‘inexorably locks her into a social system which denies her autonomy’” (Barry, 136). Marriage confines a woman in a household. Her world gets smaller than her male counterparts. Society demands roles of wife and mother from her. Very few women can go beyond these social expectations and can establish their own individual identities. Marriage can be seen as a tool for social castration of women in South Asian patriarchy.

Rahul in the story is not an exception to that. Rahul thinks that her principal duty is to make herself a ‘goodie’ (Shree, 40) for him. According to Rahul, she needs to ‘eat drink make merry’ only. She needn’t be involved in serious affairs of the world. Munia feels that she’s having a perpetual sleep; she’s never awake. At the very beginning of the story “she woke up to find Rahul was carrying her in his arms.” (Shree, 40) When Rahul asks her when has she woken up “Munia mumbled drowsily ‘Am I...at all...’” (Shree, 40) This shows that Munia is completely aware of her situation that her whole existence has become a perpetual sleep. She has become a sex-tool for Rahul. Rahul wants her to be a goodie for him ‘yum-yum, slurp-slurp’ (Shree, 40).

## **Self-denial**

For a kind of so-called security women choose the path of self-denial in postcolonial society. Munia feels ‘thoroughly secure in her husbands’ arms’ but she is aware of the opposite facet of the coin. To her this security is ‘like a bubble that has never felt a breeze’ (Shree, 40). In postcolonial patriarchy, dominant males think that the household chores the females do are ‘idling’. They expect from the females that they should blush when a sexual allusion comes. After telling Munia to read ‘first Erickson, then erection’ (Shree, 41), Rahul waits for her to blush. Munia doesn’t dishearten him. She blushes out of habit or rehearsal.

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### **Munia's Desperation**

Rahul gives her freedom to do 'anything' but she shouldn't fool herself. She can't work outside. She can send write-up journal sitting in peace at home. But Munia's desperation is obvious here. She asks herself, "Was this all she was waiting for? These doors and walls and floors?" (Shree, 42) Her question 'what shall I do' seems to be a disease to Rahul. He plans immediate treatment of the 'malady'.

### **Getting Pregnant for a Reason – Freedom of Womb Denied**

In South Asian patriarchy, 'woman is a womb' (Schneir, 6) and women are usually cast as mothers or wives, and are called upon to literally and figuratively reproduce the nation.' (Loomba, 180) Rahul thinks that the solution to Munia's wild fantasies regarding doing a job outside is making her pregnant. He says, "A baby must be put in there! Now, right this moment' and 'not one. A whole troupe' (Shree, 43) to keep her idle mind busy.

Freedom of choosing sex partners and freedom of womb are denied in postcolonial patriarchy. Women can hardly decide whether they want children or not. The husbands or in-laws decide whether a woman should 'conceive' or not. Giving birth is the most painful job in human territory. Still women have very little to say regarding this. They should have the opportunity to decide whether they want to undergo the pain or not. But, Rahul, here in the story, doesn't bother for Munia's consent. He wants to make her pregnant as many times as possible. He doesn't care for the pain she will undergo during her giving birth to children. Such is the miserable existence of women in postcolonial patriarchy.

### **A Patriarch Delighting in Women Well-padded**

Rahul is a typical South Asian patriarch. He likes 'women well-padded' or else there is no fun for him. He tells Munia, 'come on get rounder here and plumper here' (Shree, 43) indicating her rounded flesh. He wants her to be a seductive body only, no mind. But women of other houses, in their backyards make Munia restless 'much as a cripple sees another and becomes more intensely aware of her limp'. (Shree, 43) She gets aware of her crippled existence.

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She wants to get rid of reflections of herself. Munia is restless to enjoy the experiences of ‘a world existed elsewhere’. She wants to experience ‘a whole range of triumphs and defeats in that world’. (Shree, 44) But she knows that it is difficult for her to experience that world. She’s completely bored of her ‘purposeless state’. She softens herself and makes herself smell good for Rahul. “She scrubbed herself like she was stirring up the juices”. (Shree, 45)

### **A Mere Seductive Body**

Munia turns herself into a mere seductive body for Rahul. She thinks of only making herself look sexy enough so that Rahul is ‘turned on’ easily. Probably she tries to get rid of her ‘wild’ desires so that she can protect her marriage. In the name of giving protection, postcolonial patriarchy restricts free movement of women. When Munia asks Rahul ‘insanely’ to get her a raincoat to go out in the rain, Rahul tells her that going out is purposeless, and all she’ll do is ‘attract nasty attention’ and there are ‘Too many wolves on the roam, out for a grab of flesh or other booty.’ (Shree, 46)

### **The Extent of Freedom – Limited Domains**

The condition and extent of freedom of women in postcolonial patriarchy can easily be understood here. In male dominated society of Munia, women are subdued to such an extent that they sometimes forget their own voice. When the milkman comes, before his ringing the bell, she opens her mouth to say something but she discovers that no sound comes out. It is because she’s been ‘too long silent, her tongue has forgotten her job’. (Shree, 46) She’s only made herself a ‘perfect doll, super soft, flawless’. (Shree, 47) Probably she’s the desire to have an affair with the milkman. ‘The erect, proud, bearing, the animal grace of his body, the robust glow on his face’ make the doll melt.... Even ‘her full house and body and love’ (Shree, 47) grows rather hollow suddenly.

Third-world patriarchy denies women right to their own body and their own pleasure. In this connection Toril Moi says,

Women’s form is repressed by patriarchal phallocentrism, which systematically denies women access to their own pleasure... Male pleasure, she claims, is seen

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as monolithically unified, represented as analogous with the phallus, and it is this mode that is forcibly imposed upon women. (Moi, 142)

### A Faint Protest

Munia makes a faint protest saying ‘always you shall take me out?’ Rahul is probably afraid of Munia’s attaining financial security because if she attains that he will not be able to exploit her the way he does. So it can be said that Munia is a perfect symbolic portrayal of social castration of third-world women by postcolonial patriarchy.

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