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Sexism in "The Free Radio"

Salman Rushdie's "The Free Radio" reflects the heavy gender bias of twenty-first century rural India. Rushdie's narrator recounts the tale of a animated rickshaw driver, Ramani, who is misled into agreeing to a vasectomy in exchange for a state-sponsored free radio; yet the radio never arrives, and Ramani seems to become slowly disillusioned with his reality. Ramani's path is purportedly chosen for him by the woman whom he eventually marries, a widow who desires no more children. Although ultimately both the widow and Ramani are, in many ways, powerless, suffering poverty and great hardship, it is the widow who is repeatedly blamed for Ramani's seemingly exponential misfortune. The widow is vilified due to her unconventional independence and initiative.

The narrator, an old man obviously colored by the sexism of his time, introduces the Widow as an almost unstoppable, destructive force. She appears almost inhuman, described as having "claws" or "hooks," and as lurking in the shadows, waiting for the opportune time to strike. When out with her five children, they are depicted as a pack, with the widow ahead, leading her brood. When the widow begins to pursue Ramani, this imagery is heightened, as older women courting younger men are often, quite sexistly, viewed as predators. Yet, this initial characterization is not truly due to the widow's actions, but rather to her perceived identity as a tainted woman.

The widow possesses none of the characteristics of the stereotypical, upright woman in the 1900s. In a nation where widows were once burned following their husbands' deaths, the widow wholly retains her independence and is able to support her five children through her own means, as her husband "left her not one new paisa." She is no longer innocent, and in taking up with Ramani, she proves herself not to be chaste either. Her perceived worldliness and independence prove quite controversial for the setting.

Though the narrator presents her as somewhat wild and freewheeling, it is starkly evident that the widow is simply attempting to provide for her children and save herself from greater hardship. Struggling to support her large family, the widow is barely able to feed her children; the narrator decides that she is able to afford "three grains of dahl." Though the narrator is not entirely reliable, he even claims that the widow has resorted to prostitution to sustain her family. Certainly, any woman desperate enough to take such a path cannot be said to be in a position of power. The widow must demean herself and suffer in her children's name, but she is ultimately condemned by conservative society for her self-reliance.

When the widow later enters into a relationship with Ramani, the narrator depicts her as cruelly manipulating the young man, twisting his will in an effort to provide a better life for her family. However, while Ramani is often clueless, it is quite hard to believe that he does not understand the burden of six mouths to feed. "He was not such a fool that he didn't know" his own value, or the price he would pay in committing to this woman. The widow can only do so much to coax him into a relationship; Ramani is an adult, and, at some point, he becomes responsible for his own actions.

Though the widow receives the entirety of the blame, Ramani is as accountable, if not more so, for his own fate as she is. When Ramani proposes, she declines, as she cannot afford to bear more children. Still the two are eventually married, and Ramani joyously declares that he has “made it possible for [him] to marry [his] woman,” in reference to his recent vasectomy. In marrying Ramani, the widow has, in a way, done what is expected of her by tying herself to a man. However, her actions are still fervently criticized, as she is still the one to hold the power in the relationship; she initially pursues Ramani by hailing a rickshaw, and she possesses an intellect that he lacks. This initiative and awareness causes her to be regarded with fear and distrust.

Yet the widow is not wholly condemned until it is revealed that Ramani undergoes a vasectomy in order to be with her. In supporting and quite likely instigating Ramani’s actions, the widow is perceived as depriving a young man of his bright future, for the benefit of only her own shameful indulgence. However, the widow is attempting to protect her family; they are hungry, and she cannot sustain another child. Therefore, she has to sacrifice her morality in the name of her children’s survival.

It is somewhat unexpected, however, that the widow’s marriage to Ramani garners her only louder and more widespread disapproval. Generally, independent women are forced to suffer society’s criticisms, hailing claims of selfishness and the like, while, on the other hand, women who tie themselves to a man satisfy the perceived criteria for a good life and are commended for their sacrifice. The widow’s story, therefore, presents the ultimate sexist paradox: she is condemned for both her independence and her willing dependence.

Though the widow seems to be the prevailing force in her marriage, ultimately, she is still a woman in a highly conservative, sexist society: how much power can she truly hold? While she does prompt Ramani's vasectomy and their later move to Bombay, she is eternally weighed down by her many burdens: her history, her children, and even her gender. She appears intelligent and capable, but her power and position are strictly limited.

Due to her gender, the widow is deprived of many freedoms, but most glaringly, she is denied an identity. Her name is not given in the text, only her role in relation to a man. First, she is a widow, then a wife. Though she is singularly self-reliant, the widow's independence is not deemed to be appropriate, and so, it is not recognized; she remains a shadow of the man she is with. She is continually degraded because she dares to be a woman, alone.

The widow is condemned because of her status as a self-sufficient woman. Though she suffers greatly to ensure the survival of her family, she cannot overcome the stigma of her independence as a woman. While her story is specific to the political turmoil in India in the 1970s, the expectations and judgments placed on the widow as a woman are universally applicable. Regardless of how progressive a society claims to be, women are quite often expected to be only so independent and eventually to surrender their lives and settle down. However, each woman is free to shape her own future regardless of society's expectations. Just as the Widow found herself fat and happy in Bombay, every woman is able, if truly willing, to have control over her own life.

Rushdie, Salman. "The Free Radio."
Meyer. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2008. 696-701. Print.

Ed. Michael