Chapter IV

"The core of the problem for women today is not sexual but a question of identity."

Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*

The Beauty and Sex Object
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The quality of beauty has universal appeal, despite its varied definition. In the previous chapters, women were identified by their biological roles and by their social roles; in the last chapter, one of the aspects women characters rebelled against was their own sex and having to identify with their bodies. This chapter addresses the repercussions of the validation of self as way to find fulfilment.

Beauty has been a mainstay in the description of a woman from ime immemorial. The Mahabharata and the Ramayana contain vivid and contrasting descriptions of women's beauty. In the Mahabharata, the angry locks of Draupadi, whose eyes spit fire, contrasts with the pious Sita of the Ramayana with her downcast gaze casts a spell on Rama. In fact, the appearance of the women and how she used it was a way of fixing character. It is also a fact that one would be hard pressed to find too many books devoid of description of beauty.

Betty Friedan, in The Feminine Mystique (1984) says:

In an earlier time, the image of woman was also split in two—the good, pure woman on the pedestal, and the whore of the desires of the flesh. The split in the new image opens a different fissure—the feminine woman, whose goodness includes the desires of the flesh, and the career woman whose evil includes every desire of the separate self. (13–)

The reign of the goddess, the gynocentric period, an important concept in feminist myth and anthropology, involves the sharing of certain kinds of woman-centered beliefs
and women centered organizations. Gynocentric activities involve a set of women's strengths which could be explored and cultivated; for example, the strength of women's eroticism.

The Devi (goddess) in India is offered as fulfilling several unlike roles: at a fundamental level, she is shown as a compassionate village divinity, then as the wife of Shiva and in a rather ancillary form as the wife of other great gods. These feminine figures cannot be truly understood without the addition of the notion of Shakti. The idea of Shakti has been combined with mythological images of female divinity: it is envisioned as a force field, a principle which enables a 'sensibilisation' to the world for the supreme god, who is inactive without it. In a broader sense, Shakti is the "vital élan", the animating factor as illustrated in the fiercely anti-colonial Bengali novel, *Ghare Baire* (1915) by Rabindranath Tagore, where the self-emancipating woman Bimala is urged to become the Shakti of the nation.

But in reality, seldom does the concept of 'body' go beyond the focusing of the fleshly bodies of women—on birth, breast, breast milk, menstruation, their material experience of sex, pregnancy, violation and rape. When it does not, then it is seen necessarily as a tool of subjugation, the body, like land or riches, something to fight over by conquering armies and the men who lead them.


Women's bodies are the first place that defines political struggle— for autonomy, for reproductive and sexual integrity are right, for safe
motherhood, for freedom from violence and sexual oppression. The body is the site for many struggles over different modern/traditional-or hybrid-identities. (292)

Luce Irigaray in her work, *This Sex which is not One* (1997) states that female sexuality has always been established by masculine parameters. The parameters believe it impossible for women to possess simultaneously the qualities of beauty, sexuality, intelligence and power. Even more damaging is the fact that these very same qualities are used against each other. Or more accurately, if a woman is in possession of a preconceived standard of beauty, she is automatically believed to be in possession of these other traits. Women in sexual imagery are more or less props to the man's desire. One can extend this idea to beauty as well and it is pertinent to quote from Salman Rushdie's *The Enchantress of Florence* (2008), where the author describes the incredible beauty of a woman, 'Such beauty is a public resource...like the river, or the gold of the treasury, or the fine light and air of Tuscany.' (135)

Naomi Wolf in *The Beauty Myth* (1991), rallies against a society that values women's appearances over anything else they may possess. Her central argument is that there is no historical or biological justification for the existence of the 'beauty myth', a term coined by her to encompass this phenomenon. She puts forth the theory that after the second wave of feminism, since women were no longer limited to the roles of wife and mother, something else was needed to keep them in their places. She believes a "Third Wave" of feminism seeks to challenge or avoid what it deems the second wave's "essentialist" definitions of femininity, which (according to the third wave) often assumed a universal female identity and over-emphasized the experiences of upper middle class white women.
A post-structuralist interpretation of gender and sexuality is central to much of third wave ideology. This accounts for the heightened emphasis on the discursive power and fundamental ambiguity inherent in all gender terms and categories. But Rushdie’s writing may not be charged with racism, like the Female Aesthetic. It claims its critics, rarely referred to racial or class differences between women and largely referred to a white woman’s literary tradition.

This Chapter, titled The Beauty and Sex Object is an attempt to explore how women’s attitude to themselves in relation to others and how this feminine sexuality is used to manipulate surroundings and circumstances. The researcher has chosen to study this concept against the background of the following characters in the novels of Salman Rushdie: Naseem Aziz and Parvathi from Midnight’s Children, (1995). The Shakil sisters, Bilquis Hyder, Arjunand Harappa and Sufiya Zenobia from Shame, (1995) Vina Apsara from The Ground Beneath her Feet, (2000) Mila Milo, Neela Mahendra and Eleanor Masters from Fury, (2002) Boonyi Kaul and Pamposh from Shalimar the Clown (2005) and Jodha, Qara Köz, Skeleton and Mattress from The Enchantress of Florence (2008).

The title of the chapter comes from the concept of fulfilment in finding one’s identity and voice. It may also be to find pleasure and poise in sex and beauty. Since this chapter is an amalgam of both, the title, it is believed, straddles both concepts. What is certain is the woman finding the pleasure she seeks, albeit the role. But what is also certain is that this pleasure comes at the price of the masochistic prostituting of herself to a desire that is not her own. The chapter has been divided into the following heads:

Sex as Incest

Sex as Shame

Beauty as Identity
When viewed in context of gender, pleasure and eroticism become validated for the women because she gives birth. But not just in terms of fertility and the possibility of new life, the women are also "subjects of desire". The theorizing of the body, states Wendy Harcourt, in "Body Politics-Revisiting the Population Question", aims to move beyond "body/mind, body/spirit, body/politics, able/disabled, reproductive/productive, public/private to look at lives experiences of bodies as part of social, cultural and political institutions" (293).

Many feminists have fought to change perceptions of female sexual behaviour. Since it was often considered more acceptable for men to have multiple sexual partners, many feminists encouraged women into "sexual liberation" and having sex for pleasure with multiple partners. Vina's character in The Ground beneath her Feet (2000) is permissive - "Vina was never one for the niceties of sexual betrayal." (41). Her attitude and her talent begin to blend together.

As a result, her attitude towards sex spawns a whole new revolution, thus giving her an identity: "She became one of the first sacred monsters of the counter-culture, aggressive iconoclast, half genius, half egomaniac, who lost no opportunity to roar and suck and boo and preach and demolish and cheerlead and revolutionise and innovate and flash and boast and scold." (247)

Developments in sexual behaviour have not gone without criticism by some feminists who see the sexual revolution primarily as a tool used by men to gain easy access to sex without the obligations entailed by marriage and traditional social norms. They see the relaxation of social attitudes towards sex in general, and the increased
availability of pornography without stigma, as leading towards greater sexual objectification of women by men. Simone de Beauvoir says in *The Second Sex* (1989), "Man can think of himself without woman. She cannot think of herself without man...she appears essentially to the male as a sexual being...She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential (676).

Mila in *Fury* (2002) begin to be viewed as a femme fatale by the Professor.

This father-after his own experience of Mila's powers, Solanka was utterly sure of what happened—was slowly wooed by his child, seduced millimetre by millimetre into the undiscovered country, towards his never-discovered crime. (133)

Solanka and Mila both play act their fantasies while continuing a charade of innocence, "In that charmed space, during Mila's visits, almost complete silence remained the norm. There were murmurs and whispers but no more." (136). As Simone de Beauvoir says, "Sexuality is coextensive with existence" and this can be understood in two very different ways; it can mean that every experience of the existent has a sexual significance, or that every sexual phenomenon has an existential import. It is possible to reconcile these statements, but too often one merely slips from one to the other.

Being strong women, they also take the first step in initiating sex. In *Fury* (2002), Perry Pincus is "...a devotee of the casual encounter, consequences (wives, significant others) were not her thing." (25). Anne Wilson Schaef explains, "The initiator is the one who controls the relationship. Surprisingly, this role is often assumed by the person who is willing to touch first.

The politics of touching is an important issue that women are just beginning to understand. (62)
Rushdie’s women characters are frank about sex and sexual preferences. This is the case in *Shalimar the Clown* (2005) where Pamposh’s confessions come as a shock to her friend Firdaus: “What was remarkable about Pamposh’s revelations was the sense that she was not following her husband’s desires but leading them.” (53). Sex in this instance is mainly power and is also used for pleasure. This is in contrast to what Simone de Beauvoir states in *The Second Sex* (1989).

To the taboos and inhibitions contributed by her education and by society are added feelings of disgust and denial coming for the erotic experience itself: these influences are mutually reinforced to such an extent that after the first coition a woman is often more than ever in revolt against her sexual destiny. (386)

The women seem to enjoy the sexual encounters and the freedom to explore their sensual side also extends to the decisions made by them. In *Fury* (2002), the decision, “in an unexpected and overwhelming escalation of their end-of-afternoon routine, to remove the red velvet cushion from his helpless lap.” (137) ends the pretence of innocence between Mila and Solanka. Boonyi Kaul in *Shalimar the Clown* (2005) takes the initiative to consummate her relationship with Noman and, “She never reproached herself or Shalimar the clown for their choice, which was really hers. She had not smoked the charas to abdicate responsibility but to be sure of seizing her opportunity; nor was she afraid of what she had chosen to do.” (61)

In *The Enchantress of Florence* (2008) Jodha, the wife created by Emperor Akbar, through his imagination, is described as a lonely figure, shunned by the other real queens, who see her as a sum of their best parts, and who spends most of the time in loneliness,
acknowledged only by the man who created her. "She was a lonely shadow glimpsed through latticed stone screens. She was a cloth blown by the breeze. At night she stood under the cupola on the top storey of the Panch Mahal and scanned the horizon for the return of the king who made her real." (46-47)

Thus, Jodha's very existence depends on the king, and so when she finds that the spell she has woven around him might be broken, leaving her redundant, "She poured all the force of her eyes into his and he came back to her. The magic held." (51). She has skills she believes a man wants. "She was adept at the seven types of unguiculation, which is to say the art of using the nails to enhance the act of love." (52).

In this novel, one also sees a contrast to the prudish attitude of Naseem Aziz in Midnight's Children (1995) and her insistence on the veil, in the character of Qara Köz. Rushdie says of her, "No man ordered Qara Köz to bare her face... nor did she order her slave to do so. She freely made her own decision" (238). Clearly this is a woman at the heights of her sensuality who uses that very quality to her advantage.

Dr Christine Gomes, in The Alienated Figure in Drama (1961) highlights the quality of incest. She says:

Incest is (thus) used as a device to focus attention on criticism on the debasement of the marriage-relationship by social convention. Incest, shown to be accompanied by sincerity of passion, is an extreme form of protest against marriage, when it becomes a mercenary contract or meaningless relationship losing its spiritual significance and sacred nature. (140)
In *Midnight's Children*, (1995) Saleem is always in the throes of adoration of one woman or the other where he alternates between adoration and revulsion. It is convenient for Saleem to give up his devotion to Brass Monkey, for now he has a new love, Parvathi, and another, the country he adores which he has returned to after long. But if his feelings for his sister were truly resolved, then Saleem’s inability to make love to Parvathi who saves Saleem and enables his return to Delhi is worth looking into. In mythology, Goddess Parvati tempers even the most overwhelming of Shiva’s sexual urges, a task that none other had managed before. She is a positive accomplished feminine figure and Saleem’s reluctance stems from the recurrent image of his sister, speaks volumes:

As I kissed her in the dark of that illicit midnight I had seen her face changing, becoming the face of a forbidden love; the ghastly features of Jamila Singer replaced those of the witch-girl; ... so now the rancid flowers of incest blossomed on my sister’s phantasmal features, and I couldn’t do it, kiss touch look upon that intolerable spectral face..(396)

When his feelings veer from repulsiveness to resignation, the image of his sister too is transformed. Even when Parvati begins to make a positive impact on his life, he still cannot shake off the image of his sister, “I was doomed to find the faces of women who loved me turning into the features of ... but you know whose crumbling features appeared, filling my nostrils with their unholy stench.” (402)

If Saleem sees his sister in the woman he loves, in the case of *Pary* (2002) it is the woman who is given the role of creating a certain impression. When approached by a young man in the park, who wrongly assumes that Neela is his daughter, Neela retaliates with these telling lines:
"He isn't my father", she told the smile-blinded wearer of sportswear. "He's my live-in lover." Neela Mahendra planted on the still-befuddled Solanka's unprepared but nevertheless grateful mouth a long, explicit kiss. "And guess what?"

"He's absolutely fantastic in bed." (148)

Neela's disinclination to set the record straight is telling a way to the permissiveness of the women in Rushdie's novels. The relationship between Mila and her father, Mila's relationship with her father, Rushdie makes these statements.

There sat the widowed poet and his precocious child there was a cushion on his lap and she, year after year, curling and uncurling, moving against him, kissing dry his tears of shame. (132)

She refers to him as 'Papi' or father, an obvious pun on the word, which in Hindi, means sinner. "Papi, she had said. That treacherous diminutive, that freighted term of endearment meant for a dead man's ear, had served as the open sesame to her lightless childhood cave." (132)

This was the heart of her, the daughter who sought to compensate her father for the loss of the woman he loved, no doubt in part to assuage her own loss by clinging to the parent who remained, but also to supplant that woman in this man's affections, to fill the forbidden vacated maternal space more fully that it had been filled by her dead mother, for he must need her, must need living Mila, more than he had ever needed his wife; she would show him new depths of needing, until he waxed her more than he had known he could want any woman's touch." (132)
Mila’s relationship with her father-figure, Solanka bears shades of her own relationship with her father. Mila who shared a dysfunctional relationship with her famous poet father views Solanka as the man who will make things right. Or at any rate, prolong the fantasy life she led with her father. In Ten Stupid Things Women do to Mess up their Lives (1994), Dr Laura Schlessinger believes that this issue of controlling a man, and an older man at that, always comes from women afraid of life:

At first, they see such a man as providing a sense of security reminiscent of when Daddy took care of things—maybe even find him sexy, because he embodies masculine power. Inevitably when you make this choice and then decide to grow up a bit and start being more powerful in your own life, you become the adolescent child rebelling against the rigid dad— and you hate him. (124)

When Mila is hurt by Solanka’s love affair with Neela Mahendar, she kisses her boyfriend in front of the professor in a bid to seek attention and make him jealous.

—and he walked rapidly away from her towards Columbus Avenue, not looking around, knowing that she’d be with Eddie on the neighbouring stoop, angrily sticking a thirsty tongue down his bemused, delighted throat. (142)

Mila’s relationship with her father is similar to the one depicted in Anaïs Nin’s work, House of Incest (1936). In this Nin claims to have had an incestuous relationship with her own father during her late 20s. It has been claimed that this incestuous relationship was encouraged by one of her therapists, who suggested in retaliation for her father’s abandonment of her during her childhood, Anaïs Nin should seduce her father.
in adulthood and then abandon him. In theory, this was supposed to leave Anaïs Nin feeling empowered. The incest referred to in the book is largely a metaphor for a type of self-love or obsession with what is the same or similar to oneself. The sameness and feeling of love for each other were in actuality the facades of a love which reflected only themselves and their similarities. Her use of the word "incest" is not only metaphorical in the sense that it describes such an inter-relationship between states, but between psychological aspects as well as the obviously physical interactions they may contain.

In *Shalimar the Clown* (2005) when greeted by the sight of her father bearing flowers for her twenty-fourth birthday, India remarks, "People will think you're my lover," (...) "my cradle-snatching Valentine."(7)

India too is abandoned by her father in her childhood and despite this lack in closeness she glimpses more of her father in her, than her mother. It could be his mannerisms, his face or body type, "All along one wall of her bedroom were mirrored, sliding doors and when she lay on her bed and admired her naked body, turning and turning it, striking attitudes of her own delight, she was frequently aroused, actually turned on, by the notion that this was the body her father would have had if he had been a woman." (15)

Salman Rushdie, while he talks of his women characters as sexual beings, also casts in them a certain furtiveness in their sexual urges. Simone de Beauvoir states in *The Second Sex* (1989) that it is not only the woman's, "resistance to the subjugating intentions of the male, but also conflict within herself."(387). Saïem, hiding in the washing chest in the bathroom, becomes a reluctant witness to his mother masturbating to thoughts of her first husband Nadir.
And her hands are moving. Lost in their memory of other days, of what happened after games of hit-the-spittoon in the Agra cellar, they flutter gladly at her cheeks; they holds her bosom tighter than any brassieres; and now they caress her bare midriff, they stray down below decks... yes, this is what we used to do, my love. (161)

Amina’s secretive behaviour at least explores the idea of sexuality and is thus in contradiction to the ideas of her mother Naseem, a woman with old world values, who is horrified when her German educated husband asks her to respond in bed:

She has been weeping ever since he asked her, on their second night, to move a little. ‘Move where?’ she asked. ‘Move how?’ he became awkward and said, ‘Only move, I mean, like a woman…’ she shrieked in horror. ‘... Listen, Doctor Sahib, husband or no husband, I am not any...bad word woman. (34)

Anne Wilson Schaef, in Women’s Reality (1985), sheds light on his instinct:

Historically, women have been defined (by men) as being sexually pure and pristine. The only perfect woman was a detached and innocent virgin. “Nice women” did not enjoy sex. There were good women, and there were whores. This theory was most prevalent during the 800’s and early 1900’s, but it continues today. (47)

So when Amina has to beg and plead for money from her husband, she finds the very process demeaning, but it bolsters Ahmed’s sense of self importance:
Ahmed Sinai liked to be asked nicely for money, to have it wheedled out of him with caresses and sweet words until his table napkin began to rise in his lap as something moved in his pyjamas; and she didn’t mind, with her assiduity she learned to love this also, and when she needed money, there were strokes and “Janum, my life, please....’ and ....” Just a little so that I can make nice food and pay the bills...’ and ‘Such a generous man, give me what you like, I know it will be enough’... he techniques of street beggars... (70)

But when asked by Aadam to come out of purdah, Amina's reaction is typical, and also possible because it involves only her: “You want me to walk naked in front of strange men. They will see my deep deep shame!” (34). In the case of Bilquis Hyder in Shame, (1995) the veil that covers her body is inadequate protection once her clothes are torn away by the explosion. It becomes a source of shame, linked as it is, not to modesty, but instead to nakedness. In this case even though it serves no purpose it serves to give her a false sense of modesty. Thus, the burqa as a garment is a psychological one as well.

In an inverse to the concept of feminist freedom, Naseem Aziz willingly exercises the right of a woman to choose how she dresses- and chooses to cover herself from head to toe. By submitting to the adoption of an outward sign of modesty, the headscarf, chador or burqa, women allow men to divide and conquer. Women are either "good" - which is to say obedient - or they are "bad", in which case they are reviled:

It was perhaps the obligation of facial nudity, coupled with Aziz’s constant requests for her to move beneath his, that had driven her to the barricades; and the domestic rules she established were a system of
self-defence so impregnable that Aziz, after many fruitless attempts, has more or less given up trying to storm her many ravelins and bastions, leaving her, like a large smug spider, to rule her chosen domain. (41)

Vina Apsara in The Ground beneath her Feet (2000) uses her alluring looks to gain mileage and create an image for herself:

She appeared regularly on the covers of underground magazines, those new cracks in the media façade caused by the Western youthquake. By pouring out her rage and passion in those journals of narcotic typography, and posing pneumatically for their porn-liberal pix, she became one of the first sacred monsters of the counter-culture, aggressive iconoclast, half genius, half egomaniac, who lost no opportunity to roar and suck and boo and preen and demolish and cheerlead and revolutionise and innovate and flash and boast and scold. (247)

The topic of female sexuality, which was introduced initially with the Shakil sisters in Shame (1995) and their triune maternity, is sketched out further in the Hyder household scenes. Rani Humayun describes the conjugal mating of the women as furtive, the husbands being compared to forty thieves and the wives being subjected to sexual embraces of men they are not even sure of being their husbands. She calls it the biggest orgy cloaked under the guise of marital respectability. The whole novel is interspersed with incidents of sexual oppression and also suppression where women are not allowed to express their feminine identity in a sexual manner. Old Mr. Shakil was such a strict father that he did not let his daughters step out of the zenana (women quarters) and when they did after his death it led to such consequences which were deemed to have brought shame
upon the family honour. The Shakil sisters give a party in celebration of their freedom—it is a first heralding another first—that of sexual exploration and ironically enough this endeavour results in their self-confinement for the entirety of their lives. Rani Harappa, the young open impish girl, is reduced to a sheer possession and a trophy that Iskander uses and displays from time to time. Bilquis is probably the only character we can believe who shows some sexual spark in her when she has the clandestine affair with the movie-house owner resulting in the birth of Naveed. But her sexuality is stifled within the larger framework of tradition. Bound within the confines of honour and shame, she cannot get past the fact that she bore Sufiya, the wrong miracle, and slowly fades away into her own silence. Arjunand tries to stifle her own female sexuality and in a way becomes the female spokesperson of her oppressive male counterpart. Sufiya is the only other female character who does give vent to her frustration at being unable to explore and express her femininity and also the shame that she has been ordained to feel for her family, her nation and her entire race. But Sufiya is a problematic character. Even though she could be called the heroine of the novel, Rushdie does not give her any voice. Her thoughts are interpreted and conveyed to us through the narrator who is so evidently a man. As the novel progresses she develops into this farcical creature whose thoughts and subsequent actions cannot be read as a social commentary. She is the female version of Jekyll and Hyde, Beauty and the Beast. The awakening of her latent sexuality is presented as the rousing of the Beast within her. It is this Beast which eventually takes over her completely and transforms her into a quasi-mythical legend thus again robbing her of any identity as a woman.
Often the beauty of the woman defines who she is more than anything else. Rushdie is careful to mention the ethnic background of the women (and the men, for that matter) when he describes them. Thus, Mila has central European cheekbones (4), Neela becomes “she is one of yours, Indian diaspora” (61) and “Dark Venus” (52). Rushdie says of Neela, “Neela had dressed for beauty not warmth.” (156). The idea is that the two-beauty and dressing for comfort— are irreconcilable and this brings in the conflict between being womanly, or ‘dressed for beauty’ and feminism, which is a no nonsense approach to a woman’s appearance.

There is an irreconcilable contradiction between feminism and femininity, two largely incompatible strategies women have adopted over the years to try to level the playing field with men. Femininity is a system that tries to secure returns for women, primarily by enhancing their sexual attractiveness to men. It also shores up masculinity through displays of feminine helplessness or deference. But femininity depends on a sense of female inadequacy to perpetuate itself. Completely successful femininity can never be entirely attained, which is precisely why women engage in so much labouring, agonizing, and self-loathing. Women take it for granted that they have to pursue the feminine beauty standard of the society without becoming aware of their adherence to the patriarchal hetero sexual norm. Similar to the internalization of the male gaze, women are in constant scrutiny of their appearance against the internalized and naturalized feminine beauty standard in order to meet the requirements of the normative ideology, even though they are not conscious of such a hidden agenda behind their self-surveillance.

Another issue is with the Female Aesthetic that is echoed in Rushdie’s depiction of woman in a physical sense — feminists and women writers feel excluded by
the surreality of the Female Aesthetic and its stress on the biological forms of female experience.

Elaine Showalter, in her book, *A Literature of Their Own* (1978), claims that men may try their hand at writing women’s bodies, but according to the feminist critique and aesthetic, only woman whose very biology gave her an edge, could read these texts successfully and thus risking alienation in women’s literature and theory. But as many feminists have pointed out, this emphasis on the female biological experience smacks of bigoted essentialism as well. Apart from the destructive consequences on the psyche of the women who see themselves as worthless if not beautiful, the myth also sets women on a collision course— with one another. It creates an every-woman-for-herself battle that goes against the very nature of the feminist movement. The dichotomy witnessed in the reaction to Professor Solanka’s creation Little Brain supports the idea of the great divide that exists:

She got her own talk show, made guest appearances in new hit comedies, appeared on the catwalk for Vivienne Westwood, and was attacked, for demeaning women, by Andrea Dworkin—“smart women don’t have to be dolls”—and for emasculating women, by Karl Lagerfeld (“what true man wanted a woman with a bigger shall I say *vocabulary* than his own?”).(97)

The question of personal appearance has been used continually as a mechanism of command and control within the women's movement, reinforcing biases of class, education and ethnicity, Linda Scott in *Fresh Lipstick: Redressing Fashion and Feminism* (2006), writes:
In every generation, the women with more education, more leisure, and more connections to institutions of power have been the ones who tried to tell other women what they must wear in order to be liberated. (48)

Rushdie's novels show a marked slant to the beautiful, in the woman, and the plain, almost ugly in the man. The reader is introduced to Mila and Neela and Eleanor and every time, Rushdie takes care to introduce them as women in the physical sense. Beautiful, sensual; as though their beauty defined who they were:

A tall, green-eyed young woman with steeply slanting Central European cheekbones who particularly caught his sexually abstinent but still roving eye. (4)

His first and last blind date, she turned out to be fully the equal of her voice; not only beautiful but smart, somehow both confident and vulnerable, and a great cook. (10)

Rushdie's male characters too, view women as things of beauty. Malik Solanka is distracted by Eleanor's image in his head, while listening to her admonish him, on the phone, about abandoning his child: "The vision of his wife in the nude, of Eleanor Masters fifteen years ago in her long-haired, twenty-five-year-old glory lying naked with her on his lap and a battered 'Complete works' bound in blue leather, face down across her bush." (9). While he listens to the struggles of Neela's people in the island of Lilliput-Blefescue he is struck by the thought that, "This conflict was not a small matter for beautiful Neela." (63)
Rushdie considers it a triumph of sorts when this woman who has everything going for her, is attracted to a man who is unremarkable. He also seems to indicate that these women seek out the wrong kind of man for themselves: “Sensing in him a ferocity of commitment that was rarely found in modern men, women had allowed themselves—these wise up cautious women.” (29-30). And once they have these men, the women find nothing strange in subsuming their own identities in order to keep them. “To hold on to her beautiful Eddie, the college sports hero—whom she described to Solanka as “not the brightest bulb, but a dear heart and to whom a brainy, cultured woman would not doubt be a threat and a turnoff—she had dimmed her own light.” (116)

Solanka’s wife treads the same path of giving up on her own self for the man she is with:

Her own career in publishing was on hold, Asmaan being all the career she needed for the moment, but she had been a high flier and was greatly in demand. This too, she concealed from him, though he wasn’t a fool, and knew what it meant... She was wanted, he understood that.” (102)

Beauty is also connected with confidence in excess or exiguous. Of Professor Solanka’s creation he says,

Little Brain was smart, sassy, unafrained, genuinely in the deep information, in getting of good-quality wisdom; not so much a disciple as an agent provocateur with a time machine, she goaded the great minds of the ages into surprising revelations (17)
Mila has 'pretty girl chutzpah' (4), Neela, when she saw him looking at it, "she at once crossed her arms and put her left hand over her injury, not understanding that it perfected her beauty by adding an essential imperfection."(61). Rushdie goes on to add "By showing that she could be injured that such astonishing loveliness could be broken in an instant, the cicatrice only emphasized what was there, and made one cherish it."(62)

This need to temper out the sublime with the abhorrent, the mighty with the mundane and the good with the evil is seen throughout Fury (202). The women characters in his book cannot be strong without being weak, cannot be lovely without being immoral, cannot be independent without being a 'man'. Rushdie sees women-achieving or over achieving women- as a threat to men. The three young women who were murdered were multi faceted and immensely so:

All three were beautiful, all three long and blonde and formidably accomplished. Looking at their stunned menfolk now, it was easy to gauge the size of their loss. We boys can take care of the business, said the silent grieving faces of the families, but our girls make us who we are. We are the boat and they are the ocean, we are the vehicle, they’re the motion. Who, now, will tell us how to be. (72)

It seems as though while the young women were accomplished, their role was no more than arm candy and keeping the family name alive for Rushdie says, “A living doll. These young women were born to be trophies, fully accessorized Oscar-Barbies” (72)

Naomi Wolf in The Beauty Myth (1991) is correct in declaring that women are often undermined on the basis of beauty standards, that we are our bodies and that we are seen as women first and human beings second. Rushdie seems to stereotype according to
sex. In Eleanor's thesis, it was the 'Moor's lack of emotional intelligence' (10) that was the problem. He refers to women as "trophy wife" (10) and wearing a "fix-sex-kitten battle dress" (25). His wife Eleanor has 'a big laugh for so delicate a woman' (1C) This stereotyping is also witnessed in The Enchantress of Florence (2008). The prostitutes do not enjoy a savoury reputation but it is the prostitute pair of Skeleton and Mattress that comes with a plan to end the bickering that has grown into a crescendo among the women of the city. The plan is to for the Emperor to order all the women of Sikri to take off all their clothes. The reason is brilliant in its ingenuity. As Skeleton explains it:

When the ladies of the city see each other naked on the street, naked in the kitchen, naked in the bazaar, naked everywhere, visible from every angle, all their faults and secret hairiness on display, they will start laughing at themselves and realize what fools they are bring to think that these weird, funny creatures could be their foes. (205)

This kind of spirit of oneness is fostered because of their body or beauty being their identity. Talk has now turned to the objectification of women as sex objects and this is considered offensive to them. Discrimination, stereotyping, objectification oppression and patriarchy are some issues women have to grapple with. Prostitution, domestic work, childcare, and marriage are all seen as ways in which women are exploited by a patriarchal system which devalues women and the substantial work that they do. According to Naomi Wolf in The Beauty Myth (1991), beauty "objectively and universally exists," and is something women must want in order to be desired by men. From the research conducted by Sylvia Marcos on Mesoamerican women and the concept of bodies, we can learn that for women the need is more than just the physical act. The
Florentine Codex uses metaphors to analyse gender relations and the conduct deemed appropriate. These lines talk of morality and the thought process. In the discourse that is recited publicly in the presence of adolescents, the old women are asked if they feel desire for fleshly pleasure, being old. Their answer speaks volumes of how men and women perceive differently.

You men when you become old no longer desire carnal delights... but we women never tire of these doings nor do we get enough of them because our bodies are like a deep abyss, a chasm that never fills up; it receives everything... desiring more and asking for more. (323)

In the same culture, the man is the "the best and tastiest cobs", while the woman is "a deep abyss, a chasm that never fills." These descriptions reveal the culture of the language these stories are written in. The woman is still the vessel that needs to be filled, the man the giver. When viewed in context of gender, pleasure and eroticism become validated for the women because she gives birth. But not just in terms of fertility and the possibility of new life, the women are also 'subjects of desire'. The theory may well be that sexually attractive women are more reproductively fit and are, thus, more beneficial to society, but this kind of identification affects almost every aspect of their life and robs them of their ability to live and love their own femininity.

At the end of the day spent naked in a bid to end the war between themselves, the women of Sikri, in The Enchantress of Florence (2008)) learn some important lessons:

... in the absence of men the women of the capital learned all over again that they were not made of lies and treasons but only of hair and skin and flesh, that they were all as imperfect as each other, and that there was
nothing special that they were hiding from one another, no poisons, no plots, and that even sisters can, in the end, find a way of getting along. (206)

Naomi Wolf believes that the core of the beauty myth is its divisiveness. “Rivalry, resentment and hostility provoked by the beauty myth run deep”. (284). She goes on to add that in order to get past this divisiveness, “Women will have to break a lot of taboos against talking about it, including the one that prohibits women from narrating the dark side of being treated as a beautiful object.” (285). Neela in Fury (2002) despite her overwhelming beauty has to create another personality in order to be comfortable with who she is and how she looks:

Her description of her sexual being as “other one” who periodically came out to hunt and would not be denied was a clever ruse, a shy person’s way of tricking herself into extroversion. (205)

Rushdie goes on to bring out the differences between Neela and Mila and one can instantly see that both are different types of Fury. Neela is the quiet, simmering anger that is not quick to flare up but lethal when it does and Mila is the spontaneous bubbling over turbid anger that is deadly but does not last long. This duration can even be compared to the time they have in Professor Solanka’s life. Mila is an obsession, but also a weakness, but Neela is a calming presence that means more.

One also sees how beauty creates impact when Princess Qaz Köz’s action of taking a walk through the thronging streets of Florence, triggers off a chain reaction.

And slowly her fearlessness shamed the city’s young women of breeding into following her out of doors. Breaking with tradition, they began to
come out of an evening to promenade in twos and fours to the delight of the city's young gentlemen, who finally had good reason to stay away from the bordellos. The city's whorehouses began to empty, and the so-called 'eclipse of the courtesans' began. (277)

It might also be said that this culture of openness brings with it an end to vice, thus a profession that exploits women is controlled to a great extent by the actions of one woman.

In today's world, a theory explicitly based on woman's natural inferiority and beauty would seem as ridiculous as it is hypocritical. But that remains the basis of Freud's theory of women, despite the mask of timeless sexual truth which disguises its elaborations today. Farnham and Lundberg's Modern Woman: The Lost Sex (1942), states that the 'masculinization of women', because of education and careers, will have a pernicious effect on the home, the children and the husband and wife- in attaining sexual gratification. This could be a reason why Rushdie, in most of his novels, does not give his women characters the benefits of either education or career. It could be his way of reconciling the two aspects of her life.

In Rushdie's work there is an array of female characters that could be compared to divine figures because they grant wishes and know how to predict the future. The description of these women is however sinister, they are old and unsightly and we are deliberately lead to suspect that malign forces lurk beneath their prodigious gifts. It is possible to infer from this that Rushdie perpetuates the image of woman as witch, the darker side of Devi.
Sex and beauty are both seen as tools to achieve an end. In fact, in the case of beauty it appears to be a downright distraction from the seriousness and depth of the character. For instance, the horrific incident of Naveed's suicide is discussed in Neluka Silva's work, 'The Politics of Repression and Resistance:

Naveed's suicide enacts the tensions of wearing the 'right' perfume, constantly looking groomed and beautiful and producing babies while doing so. Defining women solely in these terms culminates in the most powerful and terrifying form of self-expression. The over-emphasis on 'femininity' in the suicide can be read as feminist because the excess inscribed in the representation of the suicide disrupts and unsettles expectations of gender identity. The extreme significance of femininity, the perfume and flowers associated with Naveed's death is a form of parody of both gender and class norms and expectations. (160)

Postmodernism has a strong appeal for feminists who perceive women's voices to be misunderstood by the commitment to rationality, objectivity and truth. In an era marked by a strong advocacy of multiculturalism, a postmodern vision holds out a promise of an inclusive global perspective- a celebration of diversity in sexual preferences; to many feminists who are keen to explore the depth and complexity of a woman's desire this celebration carries particular import. The belief is that woman can escape being a sexual victim of patriarchy and pursue her own self identity. Naomi Wolf sums in The Beauty Myth (1991):

A woman-loving definition of beauty supplants desperation with play, narcissism with self-love, dismemberment with wholeness, absence with
presence, stillness with animation. It admits radiance: light coming out of the face and the body, rather than a spotlight on the body, dimming the self. (291)

The women characters in the novels of Salman Rushdie emanate radiance from within and without and use beauty as a mean to an end, rather than allow themselves to be defined in purely corporeal terms.

The next chapter, Language and Style discusses the aspects of language and style used in Rushdie's novels.