

## Rukhsana Ahmad's "The Gatekeeper's Wife": An Existentialist Study of a Western Woman's Experience of the South Asian Mystique

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### Abstract

*Rukhsana Ahmad's short story "The Gatekeeper's Wife" maps the plight of a western woman, Annette, who is married to a wealthy man in Lahore. Despite living in an affluent and luxurious environment, she finds herself alienated and secluded. To escape the burthen of her lonely life, she keeps herself busy with animals at the zoo. To her utter bewilderment, one day she finds a woman stealing meat from the cage of a wild cheetah. For all its seemingly mysterious nature of the subsequent episode, the story invokes Annette's existentialist sojourn into the unfathomable South Asian mystique. This paper explores that Annette gets awareness of her own existence in the time of her own inner emotional strain and anxiety. The paper analysis existentialist impacts on the story from the views of two major exponents of existentialism; Soren Kierkegaard (1813-55) and Jean Paul Sartre (1905-1980).*

**Keywords:** Rukhsana Ahmad, South Asian mystique, existentialism, Kierkegaard, Sartre

"The Gatekeeper's Wife" is a short story of Rukhsana Ahmad (2014). It maps the plight of an English memsahib, Annette, who is married to an affluent Pakistani and is settled with him in Lahore. Despite living in an apparently luxurious environment, she finds herself alienated, secluded and anguished. To escape the drudgery of her lonely life, she keeps herself busy with animals and she frequently goes to the zoo. To her utter bewilderment, one day she finds a woman stealing meat from cage of a wild cheetah. For all its seemingly mysterious nature of the subsequent episodes, the invokes Annette's existentialist sojourn into the unfathomable South Asian mystique (Ahmad, 2014, 22-29).

### (I)

If the heart has wisdom  
Its embrace will hold the friend  
If the eye can see

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The Radiance is everywhere.  
If the ear can listen  
What else but praise of God?  
If the tongue can speak  
Every word reveals the Mystery.  
(Sarmad Shaheed, 1991 *The Rubaiyat of Sarmad*, 55)

## (II)

“Madam, she says Heera is an animal with the spirit of a saint”.

(Rukhsana Ahmad, 2014, “The Gatekeeper’s Wife”, 9)

The importance of existentialist philosophy in literary studies cannot be overemphasized. Since the works of Soren Kierkegaard (1813-55), Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) and Karl Theodore Jaspers (1883-1969), the philosophical traditions of existentialism immensely influenced literary thoughts and works of modern writers. They mainly theorised atheistic existentialism with its core argument that “existence precedes essence” (Cudden, 1991, 316-17).

Following Kierkegaard, Heidegger, and Jaspers, existentialism came of its mature age with the scholarly and literary works of Jean Paul Sartre (1905- 80), Albert Camus (1913-60), Simone de Beauvoir (1908-86), Merleau-Ponty (1908-61), and Jean Wahl. It is mainly through the works of these philosophers and theorists that modern existentialism gained ground in both the core and peripheries of literary and cultural studies across the world.

## (III)

This paper explores the plight of a western woman in Rukhsana Ahmad’s short story “The Gatekeeper’s Wife” in the light of broader existentialist notions of Kierkegaard and Sartre.

Kierkegaard mainly argues that when an individual is preoccupied with inner trouble, turmoil, tension, anxiety and dread, then can achieve the awareness of one’s own

existence and “only then does one fully realize what it means to be” (Aiken, 2000, 228). Kierkegaard is particularly interested in the “crisis mentality” (Aiken, 2000, 228) and he approaches to the troubles and dreads of modern man through “metaphysical and religious” means (Aiken, 2000, 228). He believes that “only by passing through such dark nights of soul can one fully know what it means to be or not to be” (Aiken, 2000, 228).

Sartre, generally considered the most influential ‘existentialist’ (as he would accept being called), tries to deal systematically with various philosophic themes related to art and literature. He, like Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, was “interested in agonizing moral questions and in the notion of personal liberty” (White, 1955, 116). He theorises that there is “a kind of void (*le neant*), a mud (*le visqueux*)” (Cudden, 1991, 317) in which man is born. He can remain in this quagmire where will “thus lead a passive, supine, acquiescent existence” (Cudden, 1991, 317) in a state in which the individual is hardly conscious of oneself. However, the individual may be relieved of this passive and subjective situation and become substantially conscious of himself and may go through a metaphysical and moral experience which Sartre calls *angoisse*, “a species of metaphysical and moral anguish” (Cudden, 1991, 317).

This kind of realization, according to Sartre, is the result of the energy that the individual derives from the awareness and that empowers man to ‘drag himself out of mud’ and bring him to existence. He will win “the power of choice and can give meaning to existence and the universe” (Cudden, 1991, 317). Briefly, it means that “the human being is obliged to make himself what he is, and has to be what he is” (Cudden, 1991, 316-17).

According to Cudden (1991) Sartre believes that;

“man can emerge from his passive and intermediate condition and, by an act of will, become engaged; whereupon he is committed (through engagement) to some action and take part in social and political life. Through commitment man provides a reason and structure for his existence and thus helps to integrate society (316-317)”.

#### (IV)

It seems evident that Annette is relieved of her predicament by engaging herself in the care of and love for animals in Lahore Zoo. Keeping in view Kierkegaard's preoccupation with the feelings "like boredom, dread, and anxiety" (White, 1955, 118) and Sartre's interest with the metaphysical and moral anguish, we can read Annette's commitment to seek the meanings of her existence. She explores the mysterious aspects of South Asia and gets herself out of 'the mud' of boredom, dread, and anxiety. It can be said that the existentialist philosophical traditions offer various possibilities of understanding the plights of modern man and the difficult and complex issues of modern life. It is further argued that Annette's seemingly personal and relatively anguished experience consequently turns into a greater realization and ultimately it leads her into another commitment to contour the mysterious and diverse facets of South Asian culture.

Interestingly enough, the elements of mystery and diversity have long been integrated to the philosophical, literary, intellectual, and religious traditions of South Asia. Down the vast periods of history South Asia has been the 'melting pot' of conflicting races and civilizations with an overwhelming unifying sense (Kabir, 1946, 9). It is all this principle of 'unification in diversity' that has given meaning to the South Asian mystique which is difficult to understand but can be sensed and realized (Kabir, 1946, 9).

#### (V)

The story of Annette opens many layers of meanings. Going beyond the domestic interpretations of the story, we can find a deeper and louder spiritual actuality and metaphysical realization. Ahmad has shown a superior worth of her creative experience. Emphasizing upon the plight of 'memsahib' and her novel experience of an animal's humanly behaviour, we can argue that the story presents an interesting and absorbing instance of existentialism.

The story suggests Annette's unflinching quest and genuine thirst for greater meaning in life. Despite living in the exclusive and privileged government residential area in Lahore,

she feels a great void and angst in her life. For instance, whenever she asks her servants about her husband's return, there is always a 'no' reply from them. And she then asks herself, "Not back yet?" (Ahmad, 2014, 2). Most often she does not see her husband even till dinner time. He never bothers to inform her of his late coming. She grumbles to herself "Nine years of this and it still hurts" (Ahmad, 2014, 2). All this throws her into deep anguish.

Events and situations keep adding new lessons to her realization of life. Now she tries "to block the hurt from her mind" (Ahmad, 2014, 2) by busying herself with her seemingly casual but very responsible engagement with animals at the Lahore Zoo. The apparent lack of warmth in her marital life for a relatively long time still pains her. These moments of anguish reveal the condition of her moral and social life. Her personal involvement with the matters related to the food of the animals in zoo make the staff wonder about her. The people in the zoo try unraveling the mystery around her unique personality. She cannot be defined by the standards set for other ladies of her class, since she was what she chose to be. Who was she? Where has she come from? Why does she love animals in the zoo to the extent that she regularly visits the zoo in the scorching heat of Lahore summer when most ladies of her class would prefer enjoying their cool siestas in their shady darkened rooms (Ahmad, 2014, 3).

It is Annette's sheer individuality that obliges her to make her own choices. To be conscious of such freedom is one of the conditions of her authentic existence. Annette's constant struggle to search for meaning in her seemingly meaningless marital life with her prosaic husband could be understood by Judith Butler's theorizing of Sartre. According to Butler, "[for Sartre], human desire [is] a constant way of authoring imaginary world" (Salih, 2007, 35). It is Annette's commitment to integrate her fragmented being into a deeper layer of metaphysical world that surrounded her.

Similarly, we can approach Annette's individuality from Kierkegaard's idea of development. According to White (1955) there is an interesting connection of the boredom, anxiety, dread of modern times to Kierkegaard's "theistic metaphysics" (120).

Kierkegaard was particularly interested in the idea of development of “the existent, individual, concrete human personality” (White, 1955, 120). White (1955) divides Kierkegaard’s notion of development into three stages; “the esthetic, the moral, and the religious”(120). Interestingly Annette’s existentialist journey is marked by these three signposts; in the first stage, she being a western woman marries a man who belongs to the east. This, seemingly a love marriage, suggests her aesthetic indulgence and it also speaks of her utter commitment to an unusual experience to explore the deeper meaning of life. In the second stage, after being caught in ‘the mud’ of her exasperating and irksome relationship with her dry and prosaic husband, she is resolute to avoid and escape the burden and meaninglessness of her marital world and its inherent difficulties. She thus enters the moral and ethical domain frequently visiting the zoo where she takes care of the animal. In the third stage, she sets her metaphysical sojourn by understanding of the feelings of humans and animal to explore the meanings of life. Annette deals with these recurring problems and strives to find meaning within her lonely life in an existentialist way. Her quest for finding meaning and purpose in her life and her desire for the family love lies deep in her soul.

## (VI)

The existentialist sojourn of Annette reaches its zenith when, during a summer day, she witnesses an amazingly mysterious incident. It is related to ‘Heera’, a cheetah in the Lahore Zoo, as everyone has nicknamed him. She is deeply involved with the condition of Heera who seems quite weak and listless. Heera is also quite disinterested in the daily portion of meat that zoo servant push into his cage. This state of Heera compels her to keenly observe the cheetah. One day while observing Heera during the food time, Annette finds that a little, tall and thin woman, named Taara, ( henceforth referred as the gatekeeper’s wife) first circles the cage of Heera slowly and then very carefully dares to move inside “the forbidden inner perimeter of white railings”(Ahmad,2014, 05). Here inside this railing only trained members of the staff of the zoo can enter. “The woman [the gatekeeper’s wife] has an eye on Heera but she doesn't seem unduly worried” (Ahmad, 2014, 05). Annette is baffled to see that the gatekeeper’s wife leans forward,

extends her arm through the railings, lifts a few pieces of meat and slips them into her bag. Annette is awestruck to see all this. She sits down because her body sways and she feels too weak to stand. She cannot say anything to the gatekeeper's wife. At least she should have yelled at her for she is supposed to be preventing such stealing that is going on for years and she is looking after these things of the zoo with the government's special permission. Annette wonders what has stopped her from shouting at the woman. To her further bewilderment she finds that "Heera got up slowly and ambled towards his dinner, sniffing the meat delicately before applying himself to the effort of eating"(Ahmad, 2014, 05). After this mysterious incident Annette feels drained and her mind is baffled to think of the daring act of the woman and equally mysterious behaviour of Heera (Ahmad, 2014, 05).

Annette desperately wants to talk over this mysterious incident with her husband that night. She knows the cold and indifferent response of her husband, yet she cannot resist raising the topic over dinner. Ahmad depicts;

"His laugh sounded curt and cold, 'didn't you ring the police?

No.' Faced with his amusement, Annette felt uncomfortable. 'What's s so funny?'

'Your policing: the sort of moral crises you've come to.'

His laughter had an unpleasant chilly edge to it, widening the distance between them." (Ahmad, 2014, 06).

Annette feels irritated, hopeless, and raged by "remoteness", "hostility", coldness, "polarizations" and "oversimplifications" of her husband (Ahmad, 2014, 07). It is during these very moments that she feels futility, void, nothingness and uselessness of life and which causes her deep 'angst'. Ahmad suggests the mental quagmire of Annette in the following words;

"Gazing abstractedly at the fireflies in the still, suffocating darkness outside. The radicalism of their Cambridge days had faded for both of them. In her case, it had dissolved into a vague defensiveness about her own realities. . . Controversies and anger ranked, hanging solid in the air between them" (Ahmad, 2014, 07).

This deep humiliation would soon empower her to drag herself out of 'the mud' and she would rise to existence. Thus she is obliged to make herself what she is, and has to be what she is. She could have the company of other western women living in Lahore but she preferred to be isolated and detached from such gatherings. To her the company of all such western woman was "a yawning in the space" that would intensify "her aloneness in this torrid city teeming with people" (Ahmad, 2014, 07-08).

Annette has this feeling that her husband and perhaps everyone else around her "was reducing her, cutting the ground from under her feet, putting her on the defensive again" (Ahmad, 2014, 08). It is from this point in the story that she decides to make her own choices, the power of giving meaning to both her existence and the world around her.

### (VII)

Notwithstanding such notions on existentialism that it dictates a negative view of humanity or reality, much of the implications of this philosophical tradition revolve around a vast and capacious space for substantially ethically and intellectually engaged persons to enact change in the world.

It should be pointed out in this connection that the story of Annette is an attempt to relieve the burthen and angst of her meaningless life. After experiencing the mysterious incident of Heera and Taara, the gatekeeper's wife, now life for Annette is more than to 'be' and she realizes that for her it is becoming to be 'something'. Above all, it is her quest for becoming that meaningful 'something' which takes her out of the mire.

As we reach towards the end of story, the emotional crises of Annette is resolved. At this point, Annette asks the zoo staff to call the gatekeeper's wife and enquire her about stealing meat from Heera's cage. When the staff explains statement of the gatekeeper's wife, it is then that Annette gets out of her predicament and experiences the significance of 'that something' i.e. the mysterious in life. It is then that she finds herself capable of solving the basic spiritual problems of her life through her existentialist sojourn into the deep recesses of South Asian mystique. The staff of zoo tell Annette that the



gatekeeper's wife says about Heera that he "wants her [the gatekeeper's wife] to take some food" (Ahmad, 2014, 09). Again Annette asks the staff that what has made the gatekeeper's wife say this? The staff replies;" She [ the gatekeeper's wife] says, Heera won't go near his food till she's taken some of it and, she says Madam, you can stay tonight and see for yourself" (Ahmad, 2014, 09). These words of the gatekeeper's wife and explanation of the staff bewilder Annette. All her western skepticism and rationalism fades and instantly she recalls the scene of meat stealing and Heera appears before her eyes, "sitting in the shadows yesterday, disinterested in the food, allowing the woman to pinch it without pouncing or even batting an eyelid"(Ahmad, 2014, 09).

The staff of the zoo narrates the following statement of the gatekeeper's wife. This concludes my argument;

"Madam, she says Heera is an animal with the spirit of a saint. He knows that her children often have to go hungry so he can't eat. He waits for her to take something and if she doesn't take the meat will lie and rot" (Ahmad, 2014, 09-10).

Annette is mystified and her reason melts like snow in the sun. South Asian mystique overwhelms her and it gives her new existence. She learns the most unbelievable realization of her life that she cannot fathom but has to believe. The next day, in the barbecue night at the Lahore Gymkhana Club, Annette joins her husband as she usually does. Everything is usual, the same crowd, the same gossip, and the same "meaningless pleasantries" (Ahmad, 2014, 10) but she feels herself a transformed figure immersed with the South Asian mystique. Both Tara and Heera have "shaken all her certainties". She is surrounded by all 'usual' but in her immersed existence she is deeply overwhelmed with 'unusual and mysterious'. In the barbecue she watches the food that turns "into bloody hunks of tough fibrous beef", she can "smell the raw wetness dripping down its sides" and "the morsel almost struck in her throat choking her with the obscenity of it all" (Ahmad, 2014,11). Annette turns to her husband says "with a bitter vehemence"; 'It's over, isn't it?' (Ahmad, 2014, 11).

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