

Masochistic Performance of Scheherazade: A Multimodal Analysis of *Prince Charming*

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Abstract

This study attempts to highlight the embedded masochist aesthetics supporting the masochistic patterns in a Pakistani short film *Prince Charming* (2021), directed by Sheheryar Munawar Siddiqui, a Pakistani actor, film producer, director and television host. The focus remains on female protagonist, Scheherazade's performative masochistic proclivities in an unsatisfactory marital relationship. This research takes Freud's notion of repetitive compulsion as its referential point that triggers masochism and identifies Scheherazade's urges and desires. Though masochism is about gaining the pleasure while bearing the pain, in the case of the film the pain is self-inflicted in the form of silence, inexpressibility, self-talks and romantic void between Scheherazade and her husband Akbar. This research offers a stand point to comprehend the subliminal threads of visual masochism which are apparently hidden in the film but are the prospective hooks to elaborate the psychological suffering of the character. The research propagates the idea that masochist aesthetics are nevertheless the stepping stone for pointing out the masochist self of Scheherazade, well exhibited through her performance.

Keywords: aesthetics; delusion; masochism; pleasure; repetitive compulsion; Scheherazade



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Introduction

This study tends to analyze the relationship between masochist aesthetics¹ and the masochistic patterns recurring in the Pakistani short film *Prince Charming*, directed by Sheheryar Munawar Siddiqui. The film exhibits the post-marital depression faced by a housewife, named Scheherazade, who is endlessly stuck in her imaginative world. She imagines another persona of her husband Akbar, a more romantic and poetic counterpart of him in her idealized relationship. Akbar is portrayed as a practical man who prefers his job and shows less interest in his wife's emotions. Their daughter, named *Wafa*, which literally means fidelity, is a binding force between them as mostly represented in South Asian households. Scheherazade, being a delusional woman, imagines a persona of Akbar who ignites the passions and emotions buried deep inside her. To fulfill the romantic gap, she perceives her home as the place where she and her idealized husband could spend some intimate moments together.

Scheherazade plays out her dual persona throughout the film; whether consciously or unconsciously, it remains ambiguous. Scheherazade being a housewife and a mother is bound to unending responsibilities, expectations and roles and she imagines herself as a woman loved selflessly to the extent of romantic pampering. She inadvertently resorts to self-arousal to the point where her sexual intimacy can be declared as masochism. In the presence of her romantic ideal, which is actually absent, she eroticizes herself in order to perform and experience her most desired passion. The film sheds light on one of the most overlooked psychological disorders

found in married women, especially of South Asian origin, who submissively lead their lives in a restricted or convention-driven household. Asmita B in her article “Post-Marriage Depression: The Under Diagnosed, Untreated Reality” sheds light on the results of a survey held in India in 2016 by stating that one of the forms of violence is emotional violence in which a woman is branded with the stereotypical remarks and sanctions while getting married. She is often prompted to bear and step into the “adjustment phase” while brushing the marriage fantasies under the rug resulting in anxiety and depression (Asmita B, 2018). Further, Maria Kari (2021) classified the layers of marriage and its blues in post married life by examining her clients’ cases. According to her the first condition for the onset of post marital depression is when a person finds him/herself out of the celebrations and festivities of wedding and is parachuted to an alien and uninviting location. Secondly the major cause is the neglect by the life partner which makes it more abusive (Kari, 2021). The film under analysis addresses these issues in the married life of Scheherazade and speaks for her untold desires for her husband and her life with him. This scenario can be discussed at a more general level while considering the married lives of South Asian women in which they have to adjust forcibly and they are demanded to bury their fantasies in the face of bland realities which results in the form of depression, anxiety, stress and isolation.

The name of the film is chiasmic. The Prince Charming is commonly known as someone high born belonging to European descent and the dream of every girl. In the case of the film, Scheherazade, a name of Arabic origin, parallels Prince Charming who exists as the desirable image in her unconscious. This aspect helps to excavate the complex historicity of the characters’ names. Dating back to medieval times, the name Scheherazade originated from the famous Arabian legend *One Thousand and One Nights*. Significantly, the name of the character in the film also suggests thematic threads connected with the oriental Scheherazade. According

to the Arabian legend, Scheherazade was the wife of a Persian king Shah Shehryar, who used to kill his wives on the first morning of their marriage. She was the only woman who rescued herself from the king by telling him stories every night and by arousing the king's curiosity about the succeeding part of the story. Fatema Mernissi, in *Scheherazade Goes West* (2000) elaborates the unmatched intelligence, indomitable spirit, and wise use of words that helped Scheherazade turn the tables on the king instead of using her body and sexual fantasies. She observes that Scheherazade, unlike other women of the *harem*, is not represented in the corporeal terms. Her words and wisdom are reflected in the legends she narrated to the king during *samar*, the time of the night when the moon and sensuous feelings are at their peak (Mernissi, 2000, p.39). Ostensibly, the film's central character is inspired by the origins of medieval times, concerning intimacy, tales, imaginations etc. In this study, it will be seen how this particular name assists the aesthetics and the behavioral patterns of the protagonist in the film.

Additionally, the name Akbar stands for masculinity and dominance, specifically if it is related to the Mughal Emperor Akbar. Within the context of the film, the persona of Akbar seems to be a mirage which Scheherazade tries to achieve in tangible form through her romantic fantasy. This aspect recalls the Mughal era during which several concubines imagined themselves to be with the king and being his favourite. Enakshi Banerjee in her article "Novel as History: A New Historical Reading of the Mughal Harem in Kunal Basu's *The Miniaturist*" (2016) remarks that Akbar was like an unattainable god for his wives and concubines. Their lives were centered on adorning themselves to become the emperor's favourite. The ultimate desire which most of them held was waiting for the emperor's glance of admiration (Banerjee, 2016, p.249). Similarly, the Scheherazade of the film, being Akbar's wife, struggled to find her place and her identity. Instead of being a wife, she performed as a concubine to fill the intimate gap

with her imaginative world where all her sexual and romantic desires were most likely to be rewarded.

The perception that Scheherazade was living in her unconscious world with an imaginative persona of her husband confirms masochistic tendency. She imagines herself to be a princess, attending her beloved in secrecy followed by a vacant gaze, emotionless conversations with her real-time husband, daydreaming and silence. These consequential behavioral shifts, which are conspicuously painful, signify that in order to act as the beloved of a shadow, Scheherazade developed a masochistic identity, which sexually and romantically satisfies her while imagining Akbar.

In the film, Scheherazade enjoys imaginative pleasure while bearing the pain of being detached from her husband, emotionally and physically. The pain, however, remains an implied feeling. The multimodal analysis of film aesthetics identifies this assumption through specific camera shots which reveal Scheherazade's personality and her journey from her name to her imaginative world. It is important to note that the film aesthetics are taken as the masochist aesthetics, made specific with the help of certain camera techniques including focuses and directions in particular scenes. This research lays out a pattern to observe Freud's concept of repetitive compulsion as the basis of masochism in which a person feels oneself bound and compelled to repeat some behavioral patterns i.e. thoughts and actions irrespective of pain or pleasure. With the help of David Machin's multimodal discourse analysis, this research will elaborate how the masochist aesthetics (objects, camera trails and focuses and characters' portrayal) are synchronized with the camera movements to generate masochistic patterns in Scheherazade's performance.

Freud in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1990) explains the complex and twisted psychoanalytic treatment of a psychopath by using the method of repetitive compulsion in order to reveal the resistances offered by his ego against the desires ingrained in the unconscious mind. He mentions that the patient in this scenario is “obliged” to repeat the past. The memories of the past are reminisced and in this stage the ego no longer offers any resisting pressure to the unconscious, thus it is vented out by taking the form of consciousness (Freud, 1990, p.13). In the film, it is shown that Scheherazade is under the treatment (without specifying the stage of the treatment) due to her delusional behavior. Her unconscious reflected in her conscious actions; depict the stage of repetitive compulsion i.e. tiptoeing with bare feet and then coming back again to wear slippers, looking at the clock, imagining Akbar with her in a compromised position, and pouring water for tea. Towards the end of the film, the camera itself becomes the part of Scheherazade’s consciousness while rotating around Akbar’s ideal figure hugging Scheherazade, depicting an euphoric yet mysterious microcosm of Scheherazade’s fantasy. These symbolic instances refer to the presence of masochism that represents the aesthetic quality of the scenes.

Ample records of behavioral patterns and psychological studies are found to determine the essentials of masochism. Roy F. Baumeister in his article, “Masochism an Escape from Self” (1988) articulated that masochism suppresses the self and stands as the “paradox” against it. The constant tug between the avoidance and seeking of pain starts and ultimately the element of self is “eliminated” (Baumeister, 1988). Baumeister illustrates a bifurcation between the self and the masochist by looping in the normal self which strives to avoid the pain while the masochist seeks it as a pleasure. In converting one’s normal conscious self into masochist self, the ideal and conventional image of the self becomes distorted and ambiguous. The desires and patterns of masochist behavior become massive for the person to the extent that he/she loses self-control and

consequently the self becomes distant and strange. Scheherazade, in the film, experiences a conscious presence of her hidden desires, buried deep in unconscious. It can be argued that masochism provides Scheherazade an escape from the self and vicious cycle of impositions. For a masochist, pain is an essential element, i.e., a part of the process and a kind of stimuli for the masochist to get pleasure out of it.

In case of the film, masochism is implied and therefore the process of the formation of masochism is also not explicitly projected. This goes well with the very nature of masochism as it is *per se* implied, something which is not in the surroundings but it is latently developed by the person in order to seek validation from the person, he/she esteems or idealizes. Scheherazade's romantic idealizations signal to her real life in which she longs for her husband to be like the one she desires. She indulges herself in the unheard and unseen moments of the day in which she orchestrates her real and imagined life by showing some liminal clues of her masochist nature which the camera captures as her unrequited partner. Thus, the meaning of pain here becomes different i.e. it appears to be covert, concurrently making the pleasure as the trophy. The pain signals the process of masochism in the film, taking several trajectories such as silence, aimless roaming, vacant gazing, secretive conversing, and daydreaming.

Referring to the absence of pain in masochism, Baumeister clarifies that the pain is normatively symbolic for a masochist. The pain itself has no direct relation with the pleasure but its "meaning" is fundamental as compared to its visible "sensation" for the propagation of the process. The pain only adheres to the loyalty, inferiority and obedience of the masochist to their partners (Baumeister, 1988, p.68). In relation with this aspect the pain has inconsequential status in terms of its representation i.e. the pleasure always has its countenance. In the film, Scheherazade presumably did not suffer from any kind of pain as it is not necessary for the

masochist to display it, but her loyal imagining of her husband instead of any other persona, her obedience in terms of her diligent service to her household, and then her expectations of getting attention from Akbar, satisfy all the preliminary conditions of masochism as indicated by Baumeister. To elucidate it further, the pain requires the symbolic outlet sometimes with no “interpretation” and “meaning” at all (Baumeister, 1988, p.68). In the film the pain is shrouded but its exhibition is suggestive.

It is important to note that within the film aesthetics (taken as masochist aesthetics) the specific objects and camera directions aid to locate the masochist patterns of Scheherazade while the other characters elevate her personality traits as a schematic representation. The camera with its focus, angles and directions acts as the observer and consciousness of Scheherazade. It specifically serves the purpose of reflecting the individual’s image which diversifies and bifurcates the unified projections. In terms of masochism, the mirror can be perceived as the pendulum striking the two selves of the individual at the same time, making it a compulsion for the masochist to address and attend the needs of dual identity. In other words, it can be said that the mirror acts according to the role of the characters, i.e. Scheherazade being a housewife and being a delusional woman while Akbar being the real husband and as an imaginative persona. The masochist aesthetics i.e. camera movements, lighting and placement of objects (mise en scene) provide space for silence, pauses, depiction of emotional suppression, boredom, unattended desires and thoughts and a place for hide and seek. The research reveals how masochist aesthetics illustrate masochist patterns in Scheherazade’s performance rooted within her repetitive compulsion. The visuals and their import will be foregrounded through David Machin’s multimodal discourse analysis.

Literature Review

The short film *Prince Charming* has received abundant applause for its propagation of mostly unattended psychological issues related to post marital depression faced by women. *Youlin Magazine* reviews Scheherazade's state by depicting the pain of a struggling housewife, lavishly organizing herself for the monotonous day ahead while watering the thoughts of meeting the man of her dreams (Khan "Film Review: Prince Charming, A Tale of Post-Marital Woes").

Jody Messler Davies while reflecting upon the psychology of the patients suffering from the trauma of unrequited love elaborates their fantasies and emotions which often make them develop the "transference love" with their analysts. Patients become "entrenched" in a masochistic manner to pursue their dismissed and unrewarded love as if they are countering a forbidden oedipal object (Davies, 2003, p.3-4). The relational mechanism between the patients and their analyst comes as the affection and devotion for the image and perception which cannot be attained in a realistic way. Similar to the film, *Prince Charming*, Scheherazade can be seen as the neurotic patient suffering from the trauma of exhausting life accompanied with workaholic and boring husband who is making it difficult for her to step out of her delusional confines. To fulfill her fantasy, she transfers her love from her real husband to the desired persona of him which is the "unleashed libidinal desires" (Davies, 2003, p. 4) represented in the most delectable way for the intimacy.

Of the relationship between marriage and masochistic fantasy of a wife is still an untapped subject. A substantial view is represented by Andrea Blanch (1974) regarding the masochistic tendency of a housewife mistakenly perceived as usual behavioral pattern. She demystifies the stereotype that women (housewives) are in much need of seeking misery, pain and torture as compared to men. She asserts that a housewife beats herself to death in order to seek praise and appreciation because the women's lives are clouded by the myth of masochism and it

overpowers the reason of judgment (qtd in Caplan, 2005). With this in perspective, arguably, rather than a feminine trait, masochism becomes a social stamp.

Another determinant of masochism and its socially conforming presence in marriage is represented by Sarah Salih in her article “Unpleasures of the Flesh: Medieval Marriage, Masochism, and the History of Heterosexuality” (2011). By concluding her argument she claims that the history of heterosexuality has seen the pain and suffering of wives, reverberated as masochism i.e. the masochist wives. Subsequently, the “performance of conformity” of women/wives inhabits the space of theatrical household for its representation of sexual displeasure and agony (Salih, 2011, p. 145-146). This unusual phenomenon on the part of women i.e. obedience and masochism are collected together in the above observation while demonstrating the fact that women of the household have always been placed in the frame of knots, twists, ebbs and flows which ultimately suppress their fantasies and desires regarding pleasure. Scheherazade’s social space though not represented in the film exists in her subconscious which is flipped over by her masochist performance, a subset of her phantasmagoria.

Taking the theatrical household as the focal point for masochist performance, the significance of visual aesthetics used in the media production requires attention. Foregrounding this aspect, Gaylyn Studlar in her article, “Masochism and the Perverse Pleasures of the Cinema” (1984) reveals that masochism is categorized as the binary of pain/pleasure. Paradoxically, because of its loosely constructed boundaries, the masochist ego does not follow the binary. In relation to the films, when a masochist aesthetic is revealed, it is usually counted in terms of “masochistic aesthetics’ masquerades” and “repeated journeys” accompanied with the vacant and cold gestures that devalue the desire and seeks pain in its truest sense (Studlar, 1984). These two

nodes form the basis of masochistic structure of the short film *Prince Charming* which detests the overpowering compulsive sexual norms and its ethics of demonstration.

Studlar (1994) extends her observations of masochism in a film *Letter from an Unknown Woman* based on the story of a woman, Lisa who seduces her neighbor Stefan and erotically imagines him. Studlar extracted out the meaning of masochistic performance of Lisa by arguing that a masochist female performs the “uncontrolled desire” of her sexuality to an object which categorizes her as a powerless individual. The element of omnipotent denial, when an imaginary object or reflection is taken for self-satisfaction, creates a platform for the “masquerade” of sexual aggression which remains unresolved (Studlar, 1994). From this observation, it can be deduced that the elements of aggression, performance and female sexuality are the tenets of a well-formed structure for masochistic performance in the films.

The significance of the camera gaze and its relation with masochism is yet another topic with less discussion and critique, especially in terms of specific camera angles and shots. The previous researches endorse camera focus and positions regardless of particular existence of masochist woman who is seducing, luring, attracting and performing the sexual fantasy without any human contact. In the short film *Prince Charming*, however, the masochist female performs the masochist acts without any real male presence. This point contributes to the existing research in the field of masochist aesthetics, exhibited in the film such as the presence of sleeping pills, the dual appearance of characters, the intentional and detective camera trail, the maximized elaboration of objects (props), the dark and gloomy interior etc. All of these aesthetics foreground the fundamentals to bring forward the masochist self of Scheherazade in the film.

The beginning of Masochistic voyage

Prince Charming starts with a blank screen made palpable through the mere sound of water dripping somewhere. A few moments later a tap is shown where the water drops are dripping with an acute auditory resonance (Siddique, 2021, 0:09). It is important that the establishing shot significantly lays bare the spot of feminine sensuality projected through vagina. The tap and vagina share the common feature of a vessel to contain and withhold the pressure inside. When loosened, they drip slowly and constantly unless an external pressure is applied to stop it. To illustrate this resemblance, Machin argues that the visual selections of “objects”, “settings” and “images” are intentionally suggestive and are not bound to the literal denotations. This feature contrasts with the language which offers a confined and restricted mode to tap into the meanings (Machin, 2012). The particular descriptive object i.e. the tap is shown by the camera on an eye level shot which is evocative for denoting the vagina which is not only taken in terms of sexuality but in masochistic dimensions. The tap and its location i.e. the bathroom denote the privacy which is held from the beginning of the film in order to hush the inner passionate voices of Scheherazade.

Conventionally, women’s sexuality has always been undermined and misrepresented not only in the language but in the visual discourses as well. Taking vagina as the tabooed figure, Braun and Wilkinson in their article “Socio-cultural Representations of the Vagina” explicated that the vagina is considered as the negative and the “lack” in women’s sexuality which is marred in various imageries and different connotations, marking its physical absence and more clearly the “conceptual absence” in language and social discourses (19). The representation which marks the presence of vagina is actually the advocacy of its absence based on its features. The tap, therefore, advocates the presence of Scheherazade’s unfulfilled desires. In terms of visuals, it is just an object used for the “conceptual absence” (Braun and Wilkinson, 2001) and

has no direct association with female sexuality. Based on this inference, the tap can be taken as the masochist aesthetic, paving the way for masochist behavioral pattern to take its place in the subsequent scenes of the film.

To elucidate the imagery further, the constant dripping of water drops signifies the uncontrolled and unconscious libidinal desires coming up one after another in a constant stream. Freud in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1990) discussed the channels through which the trauma is transferred through the “narrowest limits” which inculcates the consciousness to reproduce the trauma in repetition “as little as possible” so that it might be categorized in the domain of repetition (Freud, 1990). Considering this principle in terms of water drops which are passing through the “narrowest limits” (Freud, 1990), designate the vaginal discharge implying the possibility of self-satisfaction in the absence of the partner. The recurrent dripping of the water drops can be summed as the foundation for the masochist pattern exhibited by Scheherazade.

The camera after showing the tap imagery shifts to a side table having some pills, a glass of water, a book with a pen inside, two figurines, and a couple of fuming incense sticks with natural dim light to depict the early morning effect in the room (Siddique, 2021, 0:15). The objects hold relevance to the dream sequence represented in the form of Scheherazade’s imaginations. The intentional use of natural dim light on these objects and the beaming sunlight falling at the backdrop is significant for exhibiting the reflection of sleepless nights spent by Scheherazade as the camera shows her with opened eyes staring at the ceiling fan (Siddique, 2021, 0:27). Firstly, the objects are placed between the accent chairs on an ottoman in the bedroom. The ottoman is at a distance from the bed but ironically it was near Akbar’s bed side (Siddique, 2021, 1:15). These objects help maintain the dream sequence. Firstly, the background fumes of incense sticks depict a luxurious ambience created to read the unread tales in the book present on the ottoman.

This is an underlying multimodal strategy as Machin argued that the salience is the key element while detailing the composition of an image having “central symbolic” function in projecting the intended meanings to the viewers (Machin, 2012, p.54). According to this statement the incense sticks hold a cultural value to create a specified environment for therapy, meditation, sensuality etc. Notably, the incense sticks are directly burned with fire and then its scent is wafted through the air. The burning element and then the diffusion of its scent in the air indicate the sensuality which is purposefully created to indulge the conscious senses of Scheherazade prompting her to read the particular book. To support the relationship between the scent and sexuality, Paul Jellinek in *The Psychological Basis of Perfumery* (1997) stated that perfume is embedded in the sexual drives which is not only based on its natural composition but also on the user’s art of using it intentionally to make oneself sexually subservient of the scent (Jellinek, 1997, p.3). It can be inferred that Scheherazade kept herself awake the entire night with the help of burning incense sticks which metaphorically kept her burning and longing for the pleasure while imagining Akbar.

The book contains a pen inside which indicates a pensive imagery of intercourse not in physical but in imaginative terms. The pen itself mentions the bookmark and the intentional hiding of the name and content of the book mark secrecy on the part of Scheherazade. All of these accounts are dependent on one element i.e. the pills in powdered form on the ottoman (Siddique, 2021, 0:15). The pills seem to be stimulants instead of sleeping pills as Scheherazade appears to be up all night as indicated through her staring with the high angle shot (Siddique, 2021, 0:24). The two figurines demonstrate the characters of the books, standing out as the epitome of the fictional erotic relationship between Scheherazade and her imaginary ideal Akbar. Bernhard Berliner (1958) states that masochist individual builds a mutual love seeking relation

with the object and this relationship is encompassed in the manifestation of self-gratification, attention, endowing the self-worth as the replacement of the actual love required from the person (Berliner, 1958). The atmosphere created inside the room is unusual and yet sensually appealing to crave for the delicacies of pleasure, adorned with the aromatic and aesthetic objects. Further, these details bar any possible guesses about the night affair. The only prevailing element in this scene is the pleasure principle, which Freud (1990), while explaining the deep rooted relation between the pleasure principle and the repetition compulsion argues the reenactment and demonstration of the repressed and concealed instincts in “conjunction” with dreams and fantasies. They are optimized with conscious efforts revealing the primal relevancy of the instinct and repetition to restore the loss (Freud, 1990, p.30). Hence the conscious efforts of Scheherazade in expressing her repressed desires are well executed by the objects and their organic nature to restore the life she has desired.

The mirror and the masochist self

In the mirror scene, the camera shows Scheherazade coming out from the bathroom to the dressing table (Siddique, 2021, 1:49-1:59). This instability of camera trail shows the ambiguous and meandering thoughts of Scheherazade. Subsequently, the camera takes a distant shot of Scheherazade from the back showing her in a sitting position facing the dressing mirror (Siddique, 2021, 2:01). The position of camera liberates Scheherazade to act according to her delusions. These delusions are depicted by the camera’s strategic position and a certain sultry yellow light effect illuminating the reflection of Scheherazade in the mirror as if she is placed there straight from medieval times. In this particular scene, the camera itself focuses on a back mirror and catches the glimpse of Scheherazade who is dressing herself in another mirror (Siddique, 2021, 2:01). This double reflection is the turning point in the film as from here the

narrative shifts to the unconscious world of Scheherazade and her fantasies. Machin describes that an image is not a concrete set of items but rather an abstract pool of ideas running across, connoting values through the “place, people and events” and all this is done under “free association” (Machin, 2012, p.50-51). Based on this concept, the evaluation of Scheherazade’s image will be analyzed under the aesthetics value first and then it will be taken to the behavioral patterns.

The entire mirror scene can be divided into two levels i.e. the shot taken of Scheherazade and her reflection from the back mirror and then the masochist aesthetics depicted in the scene. Christian Metz evaluated the disturbed nuances of self-recognition that the mirror is capable of leaving the individual’s own reflection and making him “double of his double”, reflecting the endless pursuit of desires and imaginations in an abyss i.e. the unconsciousness. All this is visualized with the “play of other mirror”, in cinematic terms, to view the individual as isolated and dislocated from the self (Metz, 1982). The other mirror is certainly the camera which expounds the image of Scheherazade’s reflection in the mirror. The terms i.e. isolation and dislocation reverberate with the consciousness of the camera which deliberately captures Scheherazade’s unconscious realm in the mirror, dressing herself in the sultry light effect. It indicates her disturbed, captivated and demonized figure (presumably affected by the tales she has read in the book) which is laid bare by the back mirror i.e. “other mirror” (Metz, 1982) shown by the camera. It also proffers a clue to Scheherazade’s unbeatable and irresistible immersion in the idealization. At this point, the repetition of an image i.e. the reflection and then the camera shot, falls into the psychological domain of Freud’s uncanny where he talks about the phenomenon of the double. Freud (1919) mentions that the repetition compulsion is usually subjected to the working principle of the unconscious mind and the game of instincts,

characterized with an unlikely appearance of surroundings which demonstrate the pleasure with its inescapable nature (Freud, 1919, p.11).

Proceeding further, these highlighted aesthetics/features comprising the element of repetition compulsion are entangled with the masochism. For Baumeister masochism makes individuals unaware of their self, leads them into ecstasy and binds them to the undocumented chain of pleasure (Baumeister, 1988, p. 100). This description accentuates the above mentioned scene as it represents the unaware self of Scheherazade as she savored herself with the scent, applied a hint of red to her lips and cheeks and dressed up in a shirt with deep cleavage and semi bareback (Siddique, 2021, 2:05-2:27) in the ecstasy. It shows her will to pursue pleasure by clinging herself to these masochistic aesthetics overpowering her and turning her into a masochistic self as he detached herself from the reality and immerse herself into the aesthetics perceiving herself as the part of it (Baumeister,1988, p.101).

The dark room and the masochist aesthetics

The film proceeds with camera shots, shows Scheherazade in the kitchen, preparing tea when she hears the sound of the door opening as if someone has stepped inside the home. She followed the sound and most probably her instincts to see the most awaited one. The camera captures her alertness as she stood still (Siddique, 2021, 3:28) and from this point her journey to reach the pinnacle of her suppressed desires accelerates. Scheherazade starts walking in a corridor with dim lighting and suddenly someone grabs her inside one of the rooms (Siddique, 2021, 3:45). Then the camera shows someone standing close to her with his back to the camera while Scheherazade is in the spotlight (Siddique, 2021, 3:52). If carefully observed, the room is utterly dark with minimum refracted light entering with its warm effect depicting the physical

representation of Scheherazade's dreamy realm. Robert Curry observes that dreams in the films are presented with a time lapse i.e. the transcendence of time and space and more generally the "discontinuities" in the sequence of events very much like the "cuts" in the film (Curry, 1974, p.83). In the dark room scene, it is quite obvious that there is a temporal shift which represents a total shift in the stream of events. The darkness and the minimal light showcase that Scheherazade is the only figure acting on the outskirts of the concealed passions while the ideal figure of Akbar specifies Scheherazade's delusions and a personification of unheard conversations she used to have with herself. The light on her face allows the viewers to observe her expressions. It is the space provided by the camera (by its appropriate distance) to her to perform the masochist act.

To strengthen these claims, it is indispensable to note a few aspects regarding Scheherazade's origin. Scheherazade resonates with the medieval origin of her name with respect to her presence in a mysterious room which can be taken as the *harem*, an Arabic word which originally means a place of sin where sacredness and law are annulled by the pleasure (Mernissi, 2000, p.12). The dark room becomes the space of intimacy, a space to cross the boundaries of the sacred relationship of marriage. Moreover, from a western perspective, Mernissi mentions the word "odalisque" a Turkish word which means "woman of the room" (Mernissi, 2001, p.36). These definitions are well suited to Scheherazade's character as she offers herself as adorned, intimately available, and provoked and driven for pleasure in her self-made *harem* where obligations are reduced. Accordingly, the refracted light in the room depicts the time of *samar*, an Arabic word which denotes the time when there is shadow of the moon in which the man and woman have their intimate moments which seem impossible in the daylight. This time becomes the sign of hope for "oriental Scheherazade" to immaculate her expertise of

spurring imaginations (Mernissi, 2000). Taken into the context of the scene, the dim light represents the moon light in which Scheherazade performs her masochism with Akbar's persona, depicting the hope to reclaim the life she wanted in reality.

These aesthetic details of the scene are the preliminary conditions of masochism in the play. The underlying fact which defines the presence of masochism and its relation with the aesthetics is dependent on the camera gaze and in this regard, Gaylyn Studlar (1984) elaborates the connections between the masochist aesthetics and the desires represented in the films. He specified that the "dream screen" i.e. portrayal of the exotic and the sexual pleasure is the primary condition for masochism in a film. These portrayals require an omnipotent gaze of the camera/spectator to fetishize it and to minimize the gap between the "masochistic subject and the object" to maximize the gratification while maintaining its distance from the execution of the scene (Studlar, 1984, p.275). Ironically the camera itself becomes the object of masochism for Scheherazade, despite the fact that she was not looking at it. The subject and the object of masochism cross the fluid boundaries with the help of gaze and in this way the camera which can be considered as "immobile and surrounded in darkness" (Studlar, 1984, p. 275) becomes the passive masochistic object aligned with Scheherazade's gaze. This aspect is justified in the end of this scene when Scheherazade shies away and bows down her head before the fantasized figure of Akbar depicting her surrender and submission; the camera corresponds and shies away too as per the requirement (Siddique, 2021, 4:22). The shying away of the subject and the object in simultaneous manner manifests the presence of masochistic aesthetics in the scene.

This aesthetics bears the masochistic act performed by Scheherazade, not before the screen but in the darkness and seclusion when the camera left her in the company of the ideal figure of Akbar. The pattern is indicated by her heavy breathing when she stepped out of the room and

closed the door behind (Siddique, 2021, 4:34- 4:42). The shame element dominates here shown through the camera tilting down with Scheherazade's eyes. Dianne Elise in *The Clinical Problem of Masochism* categorically mentions that shame is the fundamental component for the display of forgotten and forbidden erotic urges in masochistic submission. Shame generally makes individuals hide themselves from the self of the other and it broadcasts signs of sensuality (Elise, 2012, p.168). This account reveals that the shame offers the space to mark oneself as dejected, unattended, unheard and neglected to the extent that one hides him/herself to accomplish the narcissist longings. It is the same case with Scheherazade that her hiding in the room, her heavy breathing and an apparent struggle with the shirt as if it is dressed again in a hurry; all point to her self-satisfaction, indicating a masochist act in the absence of a partner.

The kitchen and masochist aesthetics

According to Machin, the objects in the visuals carry discourses, values and ideas which are not possible to represent in the texts but can be strongly communicated owing to their details and composition in the visuals (Machin, 2012). Initially, upon hearing the sound of the door opening, Scheherazade put off her ring on the counter and left the kitchen. The imagery consists of her ring, a china basin bowl and the stack of a few plates (Siddique, 2021, 3:39). Masochism is bound with repetition and appears cyclic in nature, returning in intervals to make the pain pleasurable (Baumeister, 1988). The wedding ring on the counter is spherical and connotes the very idea of a chain and an unending circle of duties and expectations. This small loop is the symbol for the repetition itself, taken as obligatory by Scheherazade being the housewife. But to connect herself with the imaginary world, she had to leave it in order to free herself from the compulsion.

Consecutively, along with the ring, the plates can also be seen as the literal demonstration of an enlarged circle of Scheherazade's entrapment in an unrewarding relationship denoted by the wedding ring. The very next object is the black china basin, bigger than the plates, circular yet having a pedestal. The round shaped basin demonstrates the cyclic nature of masochism inflicted upon Scheherazade (the user of the objects) and it also represents an endless trap into which Scheherazade always falls, as the camera remained still and confined all the objects within the same frame (Siddique, 2021, 3:39). The order of the objects from the ring to the plates and then the china basin depicts the intensity and maximized effect of repetition of masochist acts upon Scheherazade. Therefore, the depiction of utensils (with particular camera focus) refers to the presence of the masochistic self of Scheherazade who feels compulsion to leave her chores in between, assumingly every day. These symbolic associations of aesthetics are the spectrum to endorse the masochist pattern in Scheherazade's behavior. Baumeister validates the account of symbolic representations of masochism as when the self of the individual sheds off, it simply becomes a play thing and the individual takes the new identity and the self in "play or fantasy" based on the loss of self-awareness (1988). This new identity formation on the expense of losing self-awareness is symbolic yet anachronistic and provides the space to the masochist to escape from the burden of the self. Therefore, Scheherazade adopted the new identity of a beloved of Akbar as shown by the camera with its intense focus (Siddique, 2021, 3:28). The ring and the entire kitchen with its utensils represent the real self of Scheherazade which she wanted to dispose of for the moment, strongly announcing her masochist behavioral pattern.

Consequently, the second scene of the kitchen again starts with the clock ticking; thus, creating a situation of emergency for Scheherazade upon Akbar's instructions of bringing him the breakfast (Siddique, 2021, 6:53). The clock becomes significant as it is the inevitable

command of on-going events and consequently the ticking of the clock correlates with the repetitive compulsion of a certain pattern, of “something identical” to achieve the pleasure. When the individual counteracts with something, opposite to their pleasure principle, they feel anxious and fearful (Freud 29). The time is the reality principle effectively dismantling the route of pleasure of Scheherazade, of being alone with her beloved, and the effect of this inevitable reality is depicted by her facial expressions (Siddique, 2021, 6:58). Clyde Kluckhohn reported that myths actively create and recreate the personality and conduct of an individual in a culture such as “counting and guessing” before the clock strikes, a kind of divination to guess before something happens, usually categorized in obsessive behaviour (Kluckhohn, 1942). This account reverberates with Scheherazade’s fear of losing the time, reserved for the meeting with her beloved as a masochist who is afraid of her desires and fantasies to be left unattended and to be rejected by the partner (Baumeister, 1988).

Motherhood and the masochist Scheherazade

The notion of motherhood in the context of the film is not incidental but symbolic. Diving into the notion of motherhood, Helene Deutsch in *The Psychoanalysis of Sexual Functions of Women* elaborates the close relationship between the female reproductive system and its functioning on the parameters of masochism. She indicates that the female bears the burden of the pain in contrast to men with respect to their reproductive nature. Women simply become the carriers of species, followed by the reproductive changes i.e. from virginity to “defloration”, “menstruation”, “pregnancy” and “menopause”. These complex changes are the “trauma”, escorted by the demands of the body and create a space for psychic disorders (Deutsch, 1991, p.32-33). These cues of masochistic identity persist in the mother figure of Scheherazade who is bound to assist and nurture her child despite her illness. Though there are no particular aesthetics

in the film which cover this thematic pattern, the figure of a mother and her daughter is sufficient to reflect the masochist motherhood, specifically if the pain-pleasure binary is considered. What is noteworthy is the tug between the nature of a female reproductive system and the psychic nuances created by it. In both cases the pain remains a constant factor whether in the impregnation or in the instinctual drive of masochism. It is imperative to note that the mere presence of the motherly figure denotes all the complexities of biological and psychic aspects which repetitively function on the basis of pain, a similar attribute of masochism as Baumeister vehemently claimed: the pain in masochism is “cultivated while injury is avoided” (1988, p.14). Scheherazade’s attention and devotion to her daughter regardless of her illness represent the repetition embedded in her motherly nature of bearing pain and providing comfort to the child. Duetsch’s clarifies that feminine sexuality is rooted within the passivity of the reproductive organ which is “destined for destruction” by an outer reinforcement and restructuring which ultimately leads women to repressive masochism in order to rekindle the urges of “defloration and rape” in fantasies and stories (1991, p.50).

The idea supports the masochist tendency of Scheherazade as after having a daughter; she couldn’t bear any other child due to her illness. To cover it up, she tended to perform the seductive and intimate acts alone in the presence of an identical persona to fulfill the fantasies of defloration. Therefore, the idea of Scheherazade’s motherhood is masochistic as it comes under the umbrella of repetitive compulsion. Freud suggested that re-experiencing the compulsion to act in repetition is great inertia against the ego by its capability of providing pleasure i.e. the unpleasure and the pleasure are taking place in equal shifts; a simultaneous experience (1991, p.14).

The ever-living trap of masochism

In the last iconic scene of the film, when everyone leaves, Scheherazade is again left alone with her beloved who was impatiently waiting for her. The scene starts with untying her hair which is identical to the scene of the room when she left it with open hair (Siddique, 2021, 10:14). Her gaze followed the traces of her beloved, standing in the living room by extending his arms to embrace Scheherazade. At this point, the camera movement entails the world of phantasmagoria, depicted with its circular motion (arc shot) around the imaginary couple with visuals fading into each other (Siddique, 2021, 10:24-10:33). The circular motion of the camera represents the cosmic world of two lovers with its unending repetition as the unconsciousness prevails in the compulsion to perform a certain act or gesture just like “breathing” or the “changing of seasons” which otherwise is turned into anxiety (Freud, 1990). This is portrayed in the scene when Scheherazade, hurriedly opened her hair in order to breathe in the air of fantasy and dreams and then the arc shot of the camera becomes the spinning unconscious state of Scheherazade who is trapped in the unending circle of masochism which she has to perform for the survival not only hers but of her fantasies and stories she probably would have grown up with and wanted to mark them under realism. The fading of the visuals adamantly represents the efforts of retaining the romantic persona of Akbar with associated vows and passions by Scheherazade as she is shown standing alone in the living room with her head up as if watching Akbar, with her full shot from head to toe (Siddique, 2021, 11:00). This is her reality as she is all alone experiencing and enduring her masochistic identity after serving the family members as her priority. Baumeister with respect to the idea of escape in masochism argues that the masochists under demanding responsibilities often feel themselves as stagnant because they perform under the burden of self-awareness and self-consciousness which lead them to serve ego. Masochism provides an escape to them where they lose their esteem and imposed expectations as a reward (1988, p.91). At the end of the film, Scheherazade is shown as a lonely figure in her dreamland with her beloved in

line with Baumeister's notion of expectations and pressures on the self (1988, p.91). The camera, eventually, departs and gives her the space to act according to her whims the entire day ahead.

Conclusion

Prince Charming offers a comprehensive account of masochist aesthetics entrenched within the film narrative to accomplish the performing masochist self of Scheherazade. The tentative point highlighted by the research is the collaboration of the specific camera movement i.e. detective, intentional and stagnant (static focus) over the characters and the specific object which exhibit the masochist pattern in the film. The relationship between the masochist aesthetics and the masochist patterns reveal the muted sexuality of Scheherazade which is intentionally hidden from the camera. Her masochist sexuality is highlighted by the presence of objects such as pills, book, ring, clock, tap etc. which resonate with the delusions, desires, and cravings and an urge to repeat the compulsive pattern. Her divided self, i.e. her own individuality as the desirable woman, being a mother and a wife needs attention which when not given makes her refashion her experience of the desired life with her beloved. She tentatively mirrored herself into an untapped and unexplored abyss where masochism was the only option for her to re-experience her hidden erotic imaginations structured within the masochist aesthetics. Therefore, Scheherazade's real self is reversed with her mirrored self she wanted to attain with the help of masochism, predominantly by having the persona of Akbar. She minimized the difference between the one tantalized by the fairytales, fragrances and pills and the one with responsibilities of dutiful wife and a mother. This triangulation adheres to the reality i.e. the unavailability and support from others which forced her to step into the coping mechanism with the help of masochism. Her existence between these two selves amplifies the masochist aesthetics which in alliance with the camera signal towards her masochist behavioral patterns.

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ENDNOTES:

- ¹ [Editor’s Note]: Masochistic aesthetics in cinema was theorised previously in the 1980s in works like Studlar (1985), Mmizejewski (1987). The authors Zafar and Anwar (2024) have a new and an updated look at the same concept with a different angle. Please cite as: Zafar, A., & Anwar, N. Masochistic Performance of Scheherazade: A Multimodal Analysis of Prince Charming. *CINEJ Cinema Journal*, 12(2), 180–207. <https://doi.org/10.5195/cinej.2024.646>.