

# Understanding Male Shame

Aneta Stepien

## **Abstract:**

In pursuit of a better understanding of the cultural functioning of male gender, this paper aims to explain the paradoxes of shame in men, which, as distinguished from female shame, appears to be an emotion considered shameful in men. Drawing upon interdisciplinary research on shame, and on masculinity in cultural representations, this analysis begins with an overview of the status of shame in patriarchal contexts, where male shame has been interpreted in terms of honour. Furthermore, the paper traces the disturbance to the masculine hegemony brought by feminist discourses, looking at the ways in which the redefinition of male roles by feminism repositions male shame, as now applying directly to the male body. Finally, based on the film by Steven McQueen *Shame* (2011), the paper discusses shame in the contemporary, urban context to reveal that shame in application to postmodern man becomes an abject. As an emotion that has the ability to undermine and emasculate men, shame, in particular when applied to the idea of masculinity based on performance, has to be masked and suppressed to protect male identity.

**Keywords:** masculinity, shame, honour, patriarchy, hegemonic masculinity, feminism, male body, nakedness, penis.

## Erkek Utancını Anlamak

Aneta Stepien

### Özet:

Bu makale, erkek cinsiyetinin kültürel işleyişine yönelik daha iyi bir kavrayış geliştirme amacıyla, kadın utancından farklı olarak, bizzat erkeklerin kendileri için utanç verici kabul edilen bir duygu olarak gözükken erkek utancının paradokslarını açıklamayı hedefliyor. Bu çözümleme, utanç üzerine disiplinlerarası araştırmalara ve erkekliklerin kültürel temsillerine dayanarak, ilkin erkek utancının namus bağlamında yaorumlandığı ataerkil bağlamlarda utancın konumunun bir değerlendirmesini yapmakta. Bu makale ayrıca, feminizmin doğrudan doğruya erkek bedenine uygulayıp erkek utancını yeniden konumlandırarak erkek rollerini yeniden tanımlaması vasıtasıyla, feminist söylemlerin eril hegemonya üzerinde yol açtığı rahatsızlıkların izlerini sürmektedir. Sonuçta ise bu yazı Steven McQueen'in *Shame* (2011) filmine odaklanarak, utanç postmodern erkeğe uygulandığında onu bir perişan haline getirdiğini ortaya koymak amacıyla utancı çağdaş kent bağlamında ele almakta. Erkeğin temelini çürütme ve onu iğdiş etme yetisine sahip bir duygu olarak utanç, erkek kimliğini korumak amacıyla maskelenmeli ve baskılanmalıdır.

**Anahtar sözcükler:** erkeklik, utanç, namus, ataerkillik, hegemonik erkeklik, feminizm, erkek bedeni, çıplaklık, penis

## Shame as Honour

When Omar, a character of Salman Rushdie's novel, *Shame* (1983), asks his mother what does shame feel like, Chhunni-ma replies: "it makes women feel like to cry and die... but men, it makes them go wild". Further, Omar's mother provides a description of the physical characteristics of shame: "your face gets hot", that indicates blushing, "but your heart is shivering" points to the feeling of coldness (Rushdie 39). Shame makes one 'burn' from shame before others and, equally, it paralyses on the inside. These somatic reactions to shame are embodied in SufiyaZinobia, one of the main protagonists of the novel described as "too easily shamed", and therefore blushing constantly (90). Although *Shame* deals primarily with the religious and political situation during the late twentieth century in Pakistan, Rushdie dedicates a great deal of his tale to gendered implications of shame as well. The introduced comment of Chhunni-ma's refers to differences in the manifestation of shame in men and women, a subject of this paper, which centres on male shame specifically. The paper provides a theoretical discussion of shame carried out with a reference to, in particular, Salman Rushdie's novel *Shame*, and Steven McQueen's 2011 film with the same title.

Most definitions of shame link the emotion to a kind of exposure. Helen Merrell Lynd notes that the experience of shame appears to embody the root meaning of the word "to uncover, to expose, to wound". These are experiences of exposure "of peculiarly sensitive, intimate, vulnerable aspects of the self" adds Lynd (27). As apparent from Lynd's definition, shame is an intense emotion that takes over the whole self, 'I am the shame I feel', hence, most likely it incites a wish to hide or disappear. Although for both genders, the same problem can be the source of shame, e.g., failing in a professional career, appearance or health, men may tend to hide their shame rather than admit it. The parabolic story by philosopher LeszekKołakowski illustrates how admitting shame triggers even greater shame in men. "The Tale of a

Great Shame” from the collection *Tales from the Kingdom of Lailonia* (1989), describes the story of a soldier Rio who, while doing his military service, began to feel ashamed when he could not remember the colour of the eyes of his beloved Muria. Neither could he recall the colour of her hair. Rio was about to write to Muria asking her for help but he felt that admitting his failure would cause even greater shame. His shame was so great that the soldier began to shrink, in the end reaching the size of a man’s finger. Rio was jailed and, because of his diminished size, placed in a food can. The judge sentenced him to “fading away from shame” explaining that he broke the army code, which states that a soldier “may not be ashamed, because he might shrink and thereby diminish his fighting ability” (Kolakowski 88). As it emerges from Kolakowski’s story, feeling shame, expressed metaphorically as the sensation of shrinking, makes men vulnerable. Shame in men thus can be viewed as a certain paradox for, although it is felt, it has to be denied or masked.

Shame operates differently in men and women which relates to distinct approaches to masculinity and femininity, and following on from that, the different social roles ascribed to each sex. The manifestation of the affect in men and women, therefore may be considered the product of learnt gendered gestures, or as Judith Butler proposes, gender performance that enhance the ideals of either manliness or womanliness in the given culture. It is not that shame is informed by the politics of gender alone; it is also formed by religious, national and cultural ideologies. Rushdie’s interpretation of shame links it directly to Pakistan and its predominantly patriarchal culture; however, the novel’s invocation of Pakistan could be seen as representing patriarchal culture more generally since Rushdie remarks: “[t]he country in this story is not Pakistan or not quite” (29). In Rushdie’s Pakistan, shame stands for a synonym of a woman embodied in SufiyaZinobia herself, who was born a girl whereas her father expected a boy: “[b]eing born as a girl in a society which values boys is a shame” argues Roshin. George in his notes on Rushdie’s novel recalling words of Sufiya’s own mother who refers to her daughter as “my shame” (George 133). As evident in the remark made by one of the male protagonists of

the novel, woman is a disgraced word: “Woman (...) what a term! Is there no end to the burdens this word is capable of bearing? Was there ever such a broad-backed and also such a dirty word?” (Rushdie 62). Why woman is a ‘dirty’ word becomes apparent when looking at the structure of male shame, which, in cultures such as Pakistan has been defined in terms of honour. Significantly, another of *Shame*’s protagonists observes that a “man’s honour is in his woman”, emphasizing woman’s appropriate conduct as essential for a man to maintain his respect in the eyes of others (Rushdie 103). In order to regain his honour, a man has to fight and, if necessary, to kill. When shamed, men quite literally ‘go wild’, using the expression of Rushdie’s character, where ‘wildness’ indicates the feeling of shame in men. In other words, in the patriarchal reality, such as that portrayed in *Shame*, the loss of honour in men results in violence known as ‘honour killing’, that is a killing of a family member, in this case, a woman, who is believed to have brought dishonour upon the entire family. The explanation of male honour as strongly relying on women’s behavior proves very helpful in discovering the real reason behind women being punished. In *Shame and Sexuality* (2008), Clare Pajaczkowska and Ivan Ward state the real reason of the killing is not the women’s misconduct but men’s shame felt before others:

One might speculate that, whatever the role of cultural obligations and tradition, it is the shame of other men seeing the perpetrator unable to control ‘his’ women which motivates such action. The shame, in other words, of being seen as impotent and emasculated (“Introduction” 9).

From the above, it becomes clear the purpose of the killing is not aimed at punishing the shameless woman but at averting the shame felt by men.

Since in patriarchal cultures male shame relates directly to female shame, it is crucial to shed some light on the symbolism of distinct cultural representations of male and female shame. In his investigation of manhood in many traditional cultures, *Honor and Shame and the Unity of the Mediterranean* (1987), David Gilmore observes that since a great

part of male honour depends on woman's conduct, patriarchal cultures invest great efforts in control of the female body and behaviour. Shaming practices are one of the ways to discipline women and appoint what behaviours are appropriate for them (Gilmore 1987, 4). Shame in women, in the patriarchal context, has at least two dimensions: on the one hand, shame understood as purity and chastity is considered a virtue. According to Gilmore, for a woman, being modest and bashful translates as hiding her sexual needs in the pursuit of good reputation and taking good care of her body, achieved primarily by hiding it from others and keeping it pure; the most extreme form of that practice is the *hijab* used by women to cover their body. On the other hand, the behaviour suggesting woman's promiscuity indicates another kind of shame; namely, a disgrace that she brings onto others related to her, while her body becomes a synecdoche of that shame. In "The Shame of Being a Man", Steven Connor observes that female shame has mostly been disciplinary:

(...) in the shame attaching to menstruation and pregnancy and illegitimate birth and excessive or unfeminine behaviour (drunkenness, ribaldry, lewdness, loose talk), shaming has worked to keep females in bounds, docile, infant, obedient (Connor 219).

While women disgrace themselves and others through what is perceived as shameless behaviour, men's sexual conquests secure their image as powerful and dominating. In her sharp comment Carol Delaney concludes that female genitalia, as opposed to male "are not the source of pride but the token of her shame" (42). Aforementioned social practices of appointing certain female behaviours and features as shameful reinforce patriarchal dominance and support women's exclusion from many domains of public life. 'Shameless' women are being viewed as a threat to the patriarchal order for they are beyond the concept of moral conduct and men or other women, such as mothers who follow the same order, can no longer maintain control over them; hence, shame and shaming politics in patriarchal societies should be seen primarily as a method of maintaining power over women.



Pic.1. *Expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden* (1425), Masaccio

Although, in many world cultures, nakedness, sexual desires and sexuality in general, are considered shameful subjects and taboo, shame around sexuality and the body has traditionally been attached to the female body, with religion playing a major part in this process. A reading of the painting by an Italian artist Masaccio, *Expulsion of Adam and Eve*

*from the Garden of Eden* (1425), provides an ideal artistic example of the traditional representation of female and male shame for Western cultures as well as the embodiment of Christian politics of shame (see pic.1). The painting shows the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the biblical Eden and the expression of shame felt at their deed. Adam manifests the emotion in a gesture of hiding his face in hands whereas Eve covers her breasts and her genitalia. Until the 17<sup>th</sup> century, when the fig leaves had been successively composed by the church authorities to conceal the couples' intimate parts, Adam's genitalia depicted with anatomical precision were shown on the painting. In his reading of Masaccio's work, James Clifton explains that Adam's shame depicted as the covered face evokes association with the mind and rationality; it is a spiritual shame of which head and face are symbols and which are superior to the other parts of his body. Eve's position draws attention to the intimate parts of her body, pointing to physicality and sexuality, which became the symbolic representation of shame in women (Clifton 642). By depicting the couple in a way that ascribes reason and spirituality to the man, leaving the woman to the realm of the body, which in Western imagination symbolises shamelessness, temptation and the source of sin, Masaccio underlines traditional gender differentiation in Christian cultures. On the picture, Adam 'loses his face', or fears 'losing his face', meaning God's respect, which points at the association of his shame with honour. Yet, Adam's hiding of the face could also be read as his avoidance in acknowledging his wrongdoing and thus his failure with God. It can be concluded, that Masaccio's work depicts, but also immortalizes for centuries, certain codes of expressing female and male shame imposed by the Catholic Church's politics of gender and morality, which then impacted on other, non-religious forms of cultural representation.

Looking at the European works of literature, it becomes apparent that the patterns of representing male and female shame, described above, still prevail at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In *Issues of Shame and Guilt in the Modern Novel* (2009), David Tenenbaum discusses the works of writers such as Conrad, Kafka, Camus, Wilde and Proust, tracing



the changes in literary descriptions of remorse fostered by modernist literature's response to normative ethical standards. The characters' sense of having obligations to serve for society's good and being moral clashes with their inappropriate desires and impulses, such as for instance anti-heroic behaviour in *Lord Jim*, homosexual desires expressed in *Ulysses* and *Dorian Grey* or existential guilt in Kafka and Camus. Tenenbaum's descriptions of shame and guilt are closely related to the cultural and religious morals of the time, with eighteenth century philosophy, especially that of Hume's theory of the innate sense of social responsibility, evidently influencing the cultural politics of identity in many European societies. Tenenbaum's analysis shows that, at the beginning of the twentieth century in Europe, the notion of honour appoints what is considered appropriate, i.e. moral, behaviour in men. In *The Picture of Dorian Grey*, Hallward directs such words to Dorian: "Every gentleman is interested in his good name ...One has a right to judge of a man by the effects he has over his friends. Yours seem to lose all sense of honour" (Wild 174). Before Dorian's transformation into a cynical, "mad for pleasure" and "shameless" man, he values the young actress, Sibyl Vane, an object of his passion, by measures of a middle-class English gentleman, emphasizing her innocence and shyness. He describes his first offstage encounter with Sibyl in the words, "Sibyl? Oh, she was so shy, so gentle" (Wild 65). These and other literary examples suggest that in patriarchal cultures having shame indicates an appropriate behaviour in women for the qualities such as shyness, modesty and bashfulness are a required norm of a 'respectful' woman. The quality mostly associated with men, with regard to respectability, is honour.

### **Shamed by Feminism**

**I**n modern societies which have been implementing ideas of gender equality, and where the notion of honour appears to have lost its traditional value, shame in relation to masculinity gains a new dimension that is worth a closer analysis. During the last decades, cultures and societies underwent huge transformations with regard to

politics of gender and sexuality, following the economic and political changes of the 1960s in the United States and the 1980s in the United Kingdom, in particular. These resulted in the emergence of consumerist societies, transforming the role and expectations of what does it means to be 'a man'. In *Masculinities and Culture* (2002), John Beynon explains how economic and social changes destroyed the patterns of employment replacing the work place and class-based hierarchy of masculinities with the ones based on style and fashion: "what emerged was a hierarchy of masculinities based on appearance and which abolished more traditional masculine divisions" (106). In addition, the 1950s US pop culture contributed to the gradual commercialisation of the male body with the surfacing of men "dressed to be looked at and admired", the ideals which slowly soaked into other European cultures (Beynon 102). Media, style magazines for men and advertisements with its emphasis on promotion, transformed the politics of looking at the male body as well as men's attitude toward their own corporeality. In this new "culture of appearances", the notion of honour was substituted by the category of achievement. In addition to this new idea of male gender, the feminist movements, especially those of the 1980s and 1990s, brought a change to male roles in society. As a result of the emergence of a 'New Man', today men are expected to actively participate in domestic life as fathers, husbands or partners, sharing the responsibility of raising kids and running the household. Nevertheless, the traditional, or more precisely, patriarchal patterns of gender are deeply rooted in culture and are still actively influencing male behaviour and the idea of what it means to be a 'real' man, in men and in women alike.

In *Manhood in the Making: Cultural Concepts of Masculinity* (1991), David Gilmore observes that today real manhood is "a precarious or artificial state that boys must win against powerful odds" and that true manhood needs "a dramatic proof" (11). It is an ideal to which men and boys aspire and that "their culture demands of them as a measure of belonging" (Gilmore 1991,17). Although this quality is highly marked in Morocco, Egypt, and some other Mediterranean-area cultures, true manhood in other cultures frequently shows an inner insecurity and has

to be confirmed by various performances and rites. According to Gilmore, those who do not accomplish the ideal are made to believe that they failed, which undermines their social esteem. These new demands of manhood put a constant pressure on men to perform 'manly', in other words, to exaggerate the qualities traditionally associated with masculine domination, such as power, strength and authority. The author of *Manhood in the Making* demonstrates the presence of such practices in American culture which enhance the heroic image of achieved manhood apparent in Italian-American gangster culture, strongly influenced by the Mediterranean models of masculinity, Hollywood Western films, Rambo-like imagery and computer games featuring strong and forceful types of male characters. The emergence of various forms of hard masculinity can be viewed as a response to feminism, which makes men anxious about their weakening position within the gender order. A literary critic, James Penner, writes in *Pinks, Pansies, and Punks* (2011) that 'hardness' is seen as representing phallic dominance:

Hardness is not merely a phallic fantasy. Culturally and psychologically, hardness functions as a powerful structuring mechanism that shapes and influences male behavior and masculine gender norms. Hardness is tacitly encouraged and understood as a social ideal while softness is overtly stigmatized (Penner 15).

These ideas translate further into images of the male and female body in the cultural psyche. While traditionally, in Western societies, the female body symbolizes maternity, eroticism and weakness thus softness, the male body represents power, authority and strength, an embodiment of hardness. Although these patterns of masculinity and femininity may be constantly modulated, permitting 'hardness' and physical fitness as feminine qualities in women, the physical strength in men still seems to constitute an essence of manliness: "hardness in women, but never softness in men" (Bordo 292). With regard to this, Susan Bordo stresses that shame indeed is an undesirable quality in men for it is considered a

softening emotion and “[T]o be exposed as “soft” at the core is one of the worst things a man can suffer in this [American]culture” (Bordo 55).

After the emergence of feminist discourses in the second half of the 20th century, being a man appears a constant negotiation between masculinity associated with patriarchy and its pursuit of dominance, thus hard masculinity and masculinity which is characterized by abandonment of the tendencies to dominate over others and hence, associated with softness in the cultural psyche. In *Posting the Male*, Daniel Lea and Berthold Schoene, investigate the new conditions of, specifically, British masculinity in relation to the notion of ‘masculinity crisis’. The authors observe:

(...) the ‘crisis’ of contemporary masculinity could be said to derive from men’s exposure to two antagonistic sets of imperatives and ideals – one patriarchal, the other feminist or post-patriarchal – resulting in a behavioural and self-constitutive quandary that is experienced as stressful because it appears so utterly irresolvable (Lea and Schoene 12).

In social practice this translates to men balancing their behavior between that considered too emotional and sissy, and on the other hand, not wanting to be a violent brute or a sexist. It has to be stressed, that the idea that masculinity is in crisis, appears a reaction to the interrogation of a hegemonic conception of masculinity in particular. In *Masculinities*, a 1995 study of issues surrounding European and American masculinity, Raewyn Connell explains that hegemonic masculinity is one form of masculinity which is culturally exalted:

Hegemonic masculinity can be defined as the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women (Connell 77).

As evident from this passage, hegemony of certain models of masculinity relates to the structures of power in the society, where hegemonic masculinity is granted the position of leadership. It has to be stressed however, that the phrase 'masculinity crisis' in itself reinforces the hegemonic model of masculinity precisely by suggesting the existence of some right kind of masculinity. Hence, for greater clarity of the term it is worth adding the adjective 'hegemonic' or 'dominant' masculinity, i.e. white and heterosexual, to indicate what specific pattern of masculinity has been interrogated. The term 'masculinity crisis' excludes the variety of counter-hegemonic masculinities, such as gay or trans, as potentially threatening the dominating model of the male ideal.

These new conditions of masculinity may result in perception of feminism as undermining male position in society. In the past, merely the fact of being born male secured certain social authority and power, especially over women. One could lose honour but one still would be a man; a man without honour, to be precise. The traditional masculine subject while confronted with its general postmodern destabilization finds itself, in the words of Thomas Byers, "beset by a profound existential panic or ... despair". As Byers observes the seeming manifestations of the New Man, whether in film or literature, are a mere "fantasy" and the new man appears as a slightly reconstructed hegemonic man, which combines "a certain apparent accommodation of feminism with a deep-seated misogyny" (qtd.in Lea and Schoene 15). Elspeth Probyn takes this argument even further, stating that feminism itself can be a source of shame in men. Probyn explains that although "feminism has put forward ideals that often inspire the best in people" at the same time, it is also easy to fall short (76). Based on her analysis of the backlash website ([www.backlash.com](http://www.backlash.com)), Probyn argues that the occurrence of the backlash movement is a response to the "excess of feminism" and the reason for male trouble (Probyn 80). To support her argument, she introduces a post by Wade Balder, who, on the backlash website, touches upon the shaming quality of feminism:

While most of us shame to some degree, my guess is that women use it more than men...Men have used their larger

size to intimidate and control power. Women have had to resort to more subtle devices, such as shame. ...Women will probably continue to shame men. ...To a large degree feminism has shamed men into silence in the political sphere (qtd.in Probyn 80).

How can one understand Blader's words that feminism "shamed men into silence"?

Whereas female shame has been recognised and interpreted from numerous and varied perspectives, masculinity itself only recently became a subject of critical analysis. Arguably, the reason for the omission of the analysis of male shame, in particular with regard to white, heterosexual masculinity (hegemonic masculinity), is the status of men within feminist critique. Thanks to feminist studies, the issues of women's shame and humiliation, shame of the body as well as different forms of abuse emotional, verbal, physical and sexual, which have traditionally shaped the experience of women under patriarchy, were brought to attention. One of such examples worth mentioning is Brooks Bouson's study of female shame *Embodied Shame* (2009), where she discusses how various forms of abuse as well as sexual, racial, and cultural denigration affect women's perceptions of their bodies and shape their identities. Yet, to a certain degree feminism has created and promoted an image of men as perpetrators of oppression and violence against women. Because women are perceived as victims of patriarchy (men), and shame is an emotion considered mainly in such categories, namely, as victim (shamed) and perpetrator (shamer), it is understandable how for feminists in particular considering men as victims of any kind would deprive their critique of patriarchy of sharpness. Another reason for the lack of attention to male shame may be the status of shame itself since shame points to the minority, to the inferior, whereas men under patriarchy assume the position of domination. In *Queer Attachments* (2008), a study of cultural politics on shame, Sally Munt observes that shame 'performs' on the social level to mark and marginalise certain groups. Many of these groups are common targets whose victimisation remains historically long-lasting, such as the

underclass, the urban poor, peasants, 'gypsies', Travellers or homosexuals (Munt 3). The development of postcolonial and queer studies indeed contributed to the emergence of many works about shame, in relation to those persecuted and humiliated in the process of colonialisation and because of their ethnicity or sexuality (*gay shame*). That explains why male shame that does not relate to ethnicity or homosexuality appears to stay on the peripheries of academic research. Finally, there is reluctance on the part of men to study shame since the emotion is considered emasculating.

### Male Shame Today

Shame, nevertheless, appears a suitable perspective to approach the subject of masculinity for it can indeed reveal something about the experience of being a man; on the one hand, reading male strategies of acknowledging, experiencing and dealing with the emotion enables us to see in what ways male gender is constructed primarily as a symbol of power and, on the other hand, how admitting shame by men is viewed as a symptom of weakness. A better understating of the nature of shame may be useful to explain a reluctance to expose men in the way women have been exposed within cultural representations. Hollywood film productions appear particularly protective of the male ego, rarely allowing the viewer to enjoy the male body, in contrast to the female body, which has been highly sexualized and exploited in various cinematic productions. Katherine Sheets-Johnson provides an excellent summary of this phenomenon:

Within Western cultural practice generally... a male's body is not anatomized nor is it ever made an object of study in the same way as female bodies. The net result is that the penis is never made public, never put on the measuring line in the same way that female sexual body parts are put on the measuring line. On the contrary, a penis remains shrouded in mystery. It is protected, hidden from sight. What is normally no more than a swag of flesh in this way

gains unassailable stature and power... (Sheets-Johnstone 69)

In “Reading of the Male Body”, Susan Bordo discusses the reasons why male nudity, an uncovered penis in particular, can be viewed as a source of shame for men. Bordo points out that the penis is not the phallus. While the latter has “a unified social identity” and a “constancy of form”, the first is “far from maintaining a steady will and purpose, it is mercurial, temperamental, unpredictable”. The penis, the most powerful symbol of manliness, has, in Bordo’s description, the qualities traditionally considered female characteristics. The penis appears to be impulsive, “the most visibly mutable of bodily parts”, hence the least controllable of the male body parts (Bordo 266). The penis as described by Bordo provides constant opportunity for shame because it can expose a man’s lack of control over it such as in failure to have an erection, a potentially humiliating and emasculating experience. Due to perceptions of sexual potency purely in terms of phallic potency and strength, the penis has been reduced to merely ‘a tool’ detached from its owner and his feelings. In his notes on femininity, Sigmund Freud writes that shame, considered to be “a feminine characteristic *par excellence*” has as its purpose, “we believe, concealment of genital deficiency” (Freud 132). In other words, a woman’s greatest shame is her lack of a penis. If, according to Freud, the lack of penis signifies shame, the contrary, its possession, should be a source of pride in men and increase their willingness to expose it. Yet, the fact that the male body has been rather concealed from public discourse, as noted by Sheets-Johnstone’s comment, proves something quite opposite: a great concern of men to not expose their penis. In *The Abject Objects: Avatars of the Phallus* (2006), Keith Reader, who uses Lacanian psychoanalysis to explore the relationship between symbolism of the phallus and its biological embodiment, the penis, arrives at a similar conclusion stating that ‘phallus’ at once “speaks to masculinity and undermines its claims to supremacy”. Furthermore, Reader sums up that masculinity, which is the ostensible domain of the phallus “inexorably dwells under the sign of its own abjection” (“Introduction” 2). The penis provides a constant threat



to masculinity for although it can reassure manliness it can equally undermine it, which may be one of the reasons why frequently the penis remains hidden from public view.

Considering what has been said about shame so far, the 2011 film *Shame* by Steve McQueen should be viewed as a unique and honest account of male shame that takes into account many issues discussed in this paper. McQueen's representation of shame differs from that found in Rushdie's novel, mainly because the film tells the story of a (post)modern man living in an urban jungle. For many, the most scandalous thing about *Shame*, is its shamelessness: or more precisely shamelessness of the main protagonist Brandon, played by Michael Fassbender. A number of reviews refer to McQueen's film as the story of sex addiction since the plot focuses on the main protagonist's obsessive masturbation, countless visits to porn websites and sexual encounters with strangers: women, men and prostitutes. However, what truly surprises about McQueen's story are not the sexually explicit scenes, nor even the full-frontal male nudity in the opening scene of the film, which, as it was mentioned, happens rarely if at all in films, but the directors attempt to show weakness and vulnerability hidden behind the mask of an adulterer. As a consequence of the perception of shame as weakness, male shame tends to develop into other defensive reactions, active, occasionally aggressive, or shameless which mask shame, making it difficult or impossible to see behind these disguises. Yet, in *Shame*, the camera accompanies the character in his most intimate activities, such as masturbation in the toilet or casual sex in the back street, at the same time registering Brandon's emotions on his face. Thanks to the invasive close-ups scanning Brandon's face, which is usually expressionless to the extent it evokes suspicion, he quite literally is unable to hide his emotions from the exposure, which leaves him not physically but emotionally naked.

In the opening scene, Brandon is lying in bed, staring unblinkingly into the camera. His stillness may suggest he is dead. Or rather, he is paralysed by the shame of what he has become, of his addiction to sex, which he does not, or cannot, enjoy, yet he feels constantly drawn to it,

or perhaps something more profound. Brandon has a preference for quick and rough sex, however, when he tries to make love to a co-worker (Nicole Beharie), whom he appears to like, and who turns out to be a tender and gentle lover, he cannot get an erection. The 'performance' of sex has more weight and there is a greater pressure not to fail in front of a person he actually cares about. Sex quite literary disturbs Brandon from himself and what he may feel, and hence Brandon's promiscuity and shamelessness can be interpreted as intentional rather than compulsive or involuntary. The attitudes perceived as shameless are only apparently so, for shamelessness cannot be simply defined as lack of shame. In fact, as Leon Wurmser argues in *The Mask of Shame* (1981), shamelessness is a reaction against shame, or it is a displayed shame. Brandon's efforts to suppress or control his emotions are supported by the film aesthetics; the mentioned close-ups of stillness, long silences and muting the sounds of the outside world. Even when Brandon goes running the spectator remains very intimate with him by being simultaneously submerged in Bach's *Goldberg Variations*, Brandon's running soundtrack.

Brandon's case illustrates what Helen Block Lewis defines as unacknowledged shame, the shame which has been denied and as such appears very destructive to the self, causing pathological reactions. Brandon's excessive sexual activity can be viewed as a strategy of masking some deeper shame of being a failure as a person. Shame, in its nature, induces secretiveness and concealment of one's shameful deeds, thoughts, or of felt inappropriateness, from the gaze of others but shame in men strips them of male power, leaving them 'naked', effeminate and vulnerable, as was illustrated in Kolakowski's parable. Brandon's avoidance to acknowledge his emotions justify why the protagonist finds it difficult to build an affectionate relationship with his sister, Sissy (Carrey Mulligan), who manifests her feelings towards the brother. Yet, by moving into his house she disturbs his stasis and gets closer to his shame. The spectators are left to wonder why Brandon does not manifest any emotions, given only hints such as Sissy's remark to her brother "we are not bad people, we just come from a bad place". Perhaps Brandon has

lived through some traumatic experience. Finally, *Shame* is a study of what happens to a man, who denies shame, becoming an abject to himself. After all, shame is the emotion, which provokes self-assessment. Thus, through reflecting on the judgment of the self or others that provoked the feeling of shame, we can arrive at its source; namely, by whose values is something shameful. This enables revisiting of judgments and necessary alterations of our relationship with others. However, avoidance to revisit or share the shame, protects it, which results in the self being cut off from others in a prison, which is the self paralyzed by shame, such as it is in the case of Brandon. After many attempts by Sissy to build some kind of closeness with Brandon, her only family member left, and after being constantly neglected by her brother, who finds her presence “a burden”, Sissy attempts to commit suicide. Brandon finds her with slit wrists, covered in blood and unconscious. In the final scene, he is leaving the hospital, walking slowly towards the camera, stopping just before it. He drops to the ground on his knees, sobbing and shouting. Finally, when faced with tragedy, Brandon’s emotions are surfacing, visible only on his face for the sound is mute. As Chhunni-ma observes, shame does make women to feel like cry and die, but, it is equally true, as apparent in the final scene of McQueen’s *Shame*, that indeed, as Chhunni-ma’s sister remarks, “sometimes it happens the other way around” (Rushdie 39).

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