

# The Spatial Politics in the Craft of Postcolonial Indian Muslim Women Novelists: Reading Shama Futehally's *Tara Lane*, Samina Ali's *Madras in Rainy Days* and Anjum Hasan's *The Cosmopolitans*

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**Abstract:** In the large framework of Indian English Fiction, writings by Muslim women novelists often find lesser engagements of critical enquiry and readership outside the marginalized domain of minority narrative studies. This paper locates the discursive positioning of the postcolonial Muslim women subjects in the selected texts in their traditional space in conformation to patriarchal structures, as well as postmodern space which tends to subvert these foundational structures. In the postmodern space the female subject is out of zenana but her fragmented self is still within its ideological barriers. The leading women in the texts rather than adhering to their religiosity yearn for liberation and seek authentic self-expression which at most instances is only partially allowed. The issue at hand is to understand on the one hand their religious identity as Muslim woman while at the same time to grasp the specificity of their claims to act as modern subjects situated in the time of political and cultural modernity. The selected works in this context are *Tara Lane* by Shama Futehally, Samina Ali's *Madras in Rainy Days* and Anjum Hasan's *The Cosmopolitans* that dwell with the nuances of conforming and combating restrictive discourses that define womanhood and female space of the zenana.

*Keywords:* Zenana, Muslim woman, Space, Religion

In the large and expanding sphere of Indian English Fiction, writings by Muslim women novelists often find lesser engagements of critical enquiry and readership outside the marginalized domain of minority narrative studies. This paper would try to locate the discursive positioning of the postcolonial Muslim women subjects in some selected texts in terms of their traditional patriarchal space as well as postmodern space. In the postmodern space the female subject is out of the zenana but her fragmented self is still within its ideological barriers. The leading women in the texts under discussion would rather yearn for liberation and seek authentic self-expression, however partially they are allowed, than simply adhere to conventional religiosity. The issue at hand is to understand on the one hand their religious identity as Muslim women while grasping at the same time the specificity of their claims to act as modern subjects on the other. The selected works in this context are *Tara Lane* by Shama Futehally, Samina Ali's *Madras in Rainy Days* and Anjum Hasan's *The Cosmopolitans* which dwell on the nuances between the states of conforming to and yet combating the restrictive patriarchal discourses that define womanhood and female space of the zenana.

The term “zenana”, according to the latest online edition of *Oxford English Dictionary* is derived from the Persian word *Zan* and Urdu word *Zanana* which means woman or pertains to women. It is primarily a Muslim social institution under which a separate private sphere is assigned to woman within a household. Lefebvre in *The Production of Space* argued that with capitalism space appears entirely devoid of all social relationships—a sort of thing of all things (Lefebvre 90). Further if space is considered in its most “fetishized, mystified vanishing point, space becomes a non-thing an empty, static plane upon which people act and events unfold” (90). The first novel under discussion is Shama Futehally’s *Tara Lane* where space, society and sanctions for the Muslim female are seen specifically from a classist perspective of the authorial voice. Shama Futehally wrote her first novel, *Tara Lane*, in 1993 where she portrays an account of the decline of the feudal values of old middle class family order in an upper class Muslim household in Bombay in the poised manner of her chiseled prose. *Tara Lane* is situated in the post-independence India, unlike former Indian Muslim women’s novels such as Atia Hossein’s *Sunlight on a Broken Column* and Zeenuth Futehally’s *Zohra*. The novel published in 1993, is however, ambiguous regarding the time span of the narrative, which begins with Tara’s childhood and ends with her as a young wife and mother, but clues in the narrative, particularly the references to the “Licence Raj’ era during Tara’s marriage, suggest that it is set somewhere between the period from the 1950s to the 1980s (Barley 97). The geographic locale is the busy city of Bombay with its rapid industrialization depicted through the subjective vision of the central protagonist Tahera. Though silhouetted against an Islamic setting the overtly restrictive strictures of Islam for women like purdah is absent in the novel. The institution of zenana doesn’t have a physical presence here but its spatial nuances are very much visible.

Though none of the women characters discussed by Shama Futehally belongs to the purdah society and had good access to education, they have no financial independence or any say in commercial matters. Even without the confinement of the purdah or zenana, femininity has its own spatial boundaries as reflected in the narrative. The author shows the rise of trade unionism and the decline of aristocracy of a rich Muslim family. Spatial dynamics in this novel revolves round the place, i.e. Tara Lane, from which the title comes, a neighbourhood in Bombay which becomes a site of postcolonial and postmodern transitional space. This space is “betwixt and between economic institutions” but is best described by the adjective “liminal” (Soja 122). The central protagonist attached her identity with the place in *Tara Lane*:

But dusty though it was it was my lane. All through childhood I felt a special affinity with it because we shared a name. My name Tahera was often shortened to Tara the name of the lane. (9)

Brought up in an affluent environment cocooned with luxury, the external world posed a threat to Tahera. Born in an industrial family, Tahera’s upbringing had a strong colonial reverberation. It is noteworthy that their chief domestic helps were Christians - Samuel and his wife Katreen - revealing a sense of religious tolerance within the family norms.

The Lacanian principle of the law of the father seems to be the governing tenet in Shama Futehally’s narrative, despite the fact that her female characters are devoid of the less liberal strictures of Islam like zenana and purdah because of their anglicized life style. Tahera as a child was deeply influenced by her father and almost trusted him blindly as Shama Futehally’s text shows:

It was surprising, really, considering how entirely he could be trusted, that I was so very nervous of our being collectively and unwittingly in the wrong. Perhaps I felt an unconscious fear because the source of all good seemed to be so entirely my father. (30)

Her altruistic father offered a helping hand to the needy workers and from him Tahera imbibed the ideals of socialism from her very childhood. But with marriage things changed despite a happy beginning. The dialectics of power in her conjugal life fixed her to an enclosed space where even freedom of thought was not allowed. Tahera was bonded to the eternal duties of wifedom unquestioningly. The narrative depicts her introspections as a kind of irritation, like a “worm” pestering her mind, which she wished had crawled “underground” enabling her to “pretend that it didn’t exist”. She apprehended her ideological difference with her husband might disrupt the comfort zone between them. She grew up with the notion that finance and politics were beyond the domain of woman and she should be satisfied with the private realm of her home and the kitchen:

These were uncharted territories, looking at the blue flame on the stove, trying to fix my mind on turning over the *samosas*. Nothing in our time together, in the banter, in the freedom of knowing that nothing was wrong, had prepared for a moment when I would need to ask a question indirectly, when I alone would know the meaning of the answer, when the exchange was really between me and myself. (*Tara Lane* 85)

Tahera’s socialistic ideals could never rebel against the hardcore capitalist drive of Rizwan despite their inherent differences. Shama Futehally shows no regret in Tahera in giving up her idealism by choosing defeat in the face of her husband’s strict manners of dealing with the factory staff, after an initial clash of ideals she remarks:

He turned to me with strange hurt movement. Then he pulled me to him, and with a sob of defeat I went back to my territory, which was so much smaller than I thought it was, I was glad to go back. (87)

The spatial dimension of the women in the novel had a fixed locus. The public sphere of the factory was outside the private sphere of the women in Tahera’s household, except those of the working class. The author shows that much information regarding the factory strikes was known to the maids, while the ladies of the house remained completely ignorant about the imminent financial fallout. When Tahera rebuked Rizwan for bribing the trade union leader to end the strike his male ego couldn’t bear the ignominy of being judged by his wife. Her confined space in wifedom didn’t allow her any agency to the commercial dealings to curb her husband’s dishonesty.

The later part of the novel focuses on the financial crisis that faced the family owing to the union trouble in the factory. To deal with the situation Tahera wished to take up a teaching job but her family status posed hurdle as it seemed improper for a woman of her class to look for such an insignificant job. Her mother unaccustomed to face such monetary tension had a nervous breakdown, chiefly because she couldn’t choose a proper gift to offer at her niece’s marriage. To highlight the irony of the situation the narrative shifts to the crisis in their servants Katreen and Samuel’s life, as they had to bear the tragic death of their infant son. The loss of the house and the decline of the family business, in this novel, is a metaphor for the decline of “old” middle class values in modern India and a period of transition and change socially, culturally and economically. Contrasting the relatively public spaces of the servants’ home with that of Tahera’s family’s privacy, in particular the ability to shut off rooms and to close off space is associated with power. In the spatial terrain it is the working class women who had more agency than the women

of higher classes. Tahera needed to speak, to rebel, but her voice was muffled by the “quilt” of her role as a married woman, circumscribing her to the ideological zenana with no space for freedom and she was bound to be contented in the limited agency allowed to her. The novel ends looking not to the future, but back to Tara’s childhood, taking the reader full circle into a nostalgic reminiscence of the grand space of her former home.

Samina Ali’s *Madras in Rainy Days* the second novel under analysis for this paper explores the hidden codes of sexuality behind the veil which serves a metaphor for hideous masquerades and alternate freedom. Samina Ali an Indian American novelist explores the different sexual realms that a Muslim woman inhabits by being in purdah in modern times in her debut novel *Madras in Rainy Days*. The novel tries to present the picture of purdah more as a freedom for a young woman rather than a restriction, as it allows her exclusive possession of her body space in hiding it from external eye. The novel also explores issues of alternate sexuality in the conservative society of Hyderabad.

*Madras in Rainy Days* opens with the celebration of a wedding between Layla, a nineteen-year-old college student, and Sameer, an ambitious engineer which depict in details the social protocols of the zenana sub-culture. The five-day ceremony lush with the rich traditions of the families’ Muslim culture vividly dwells into the elaborate marital festivities within the zenana culture in the Indian walled city of Hyderabad. Behind the scenes of the opulent festivities, the central protagonist was under an emotional constraint in view of her ensuing life with a man below her social standards. Layla, who has spent most of her life in the United States, is deeply conflicted about her parents’ desire to have her participate in the traditional arranged marriage. The narrative succinctly depicts her cultural trap as she could feel at home neither in India, where she is viewed with suspicion as an outsider, nor in America, where her parents deliberately segregated her from modern culture. “I was supposed to inhabit America without being inhabited by it,” she says. Her sexual encounter with an American boy Nate is serious enough as a transgression considering the restrictive social milieu where she had to live after marriage. The narrative shows that Layla was under a psychological conflict regarding her previous sexual experience with her American lover which had resulted in conception and subsequent prolonged menstrual bleeding due to forced abortion. She feared if the truth becomes public, she will be rejected by Sameer and more dangerously her father a staunch patriarch that he is will abuse and even kill her. But contrary to her apprehensions, Sameer used her menstrual blood stains as a sign of consummated marriage before his family to camouflage his own sexual lack. Layla successfully conceals her previous relationship (and the resulting pregnancy and miscarriage) long enough for her to fit into the traditional structures of Sameer’s family. Indeed, much to Layla’s surprise, she finds herself attracted to this husband she did not choose and does not yet love. While Layla despite her cross cultural trap moves deeper into the traditional world wanting to find a home and security that had so far eluded to her because of her broken parental home, Sameer is desperate to flee the confines of the old city and show her the hybridized world of contemporary India, where people have moved out of their traditional crunches. He makes her wear jeans underneath her purdah when they go out so that she can fling it off after crossing the traditional confines. When Sameer disappears for days on end and fails to reciprocate Layla’s sexual attraction, she suspects some truth behind it, until she finds his friend Naved who reveals the secret of their gay love. Layla decided to leave Sameer, but rather than being accepted back into her parental home her own family asked Layla to accept Sameer’s tendencies as a type of recreational sex which would change with her presence.

This exposes the gender discrimination rampant within conservative families, where the sexual incapacities or homosexual behaviour of a male subject has also to be shrouded by the female within her codes of honor and shame. Naved's meeting with Sameer under the guise of a veiled woman is symbolic of the same.

*Madras in Rainy Days* is about same sex desire and the problematic of the same in conventional societies. The story makes visible the default mechanisms/assumptions of heterosexuality within Indian postcolonial theorizing. "Gendering women to fit into a neo-Victorian companionate marriage also calls for their desexualization which affects *satis* and the *zanaan*" (Patel 177). This desexualization continues to infect current discussions - literary and otherwise - of Indian women. Here Samina Ali narrativizes the opposite situation, i.e. the sexual and social ramifications of a gay relationship in the life of a Muslim woman. This sensual novel is set at the start of India's monsoon season, when the combination of torrential rains and stifling heat combine to create an almost suffocating atmosphere. The novel, with its detailed descriptions of confining interiors and its emphasis on women's lives in the home, effectively communicates the claustrophobic feeling within a real zenana.

Ali tries to make a comment on the cultural invasion of the female body by using Layla as a metaphor-- first her body was explored by an American and later partially by her Indian gay husband. It is chiefly because of her unfulfilled sexual desires, more than the betrayal for being married to a gay for which Layla leaves Sameer. *Madras in Rainy Days* offers readers an illuminating portrayal of a young Muslim woman's cultural crisis. The novel is a subtle conglomeration of the tremendous pull of the traditional world of Islam with its moral confinements and the attractive and powerful potentials and pitfalls of contemporary globalized world in the self-journey of Layla. The end shows Layla walking around the city of Hyderabad in her burqa after finally leaving her husband, enjoying her freedom behind the veil within its little space of anonymity. The veil makes her be in public space yet remain absent from public eye by its covers; it is an alternate moment of liberation for Layla. She prefers to remain in the traditional space of the Indian society within the confines of real/ imaginary zenana as a single woman rather than moving out to the liberal diasporic space of America with her gay husband bound in the terms of a companionate marriage. The religiously constructed body space of the purdah evoked in the novel stands as a sign of 'heteronormative' enclosure which is stabilized through the spatial boundaries between interior and exterior, domestic and public, the body and the house in an embodied experience.

In the third novel, the author Anjum Hasan has very little or almost nothing in her plot that calls for reading the construction of a Muslim women subject. Anjum Hasan has the brilliance as a writer to deal with her craft without sentimentality with Jane Austen-like command over form. Her postmodern novel *The Cosmopolitan* exposes the fate of art, artist and the art critic in a contemporary world of complex human relations yet sustaining orthodox values. It is rare to find someone with a Northeast connection who defies the confined regional boundary and transcends a reflection of her faith as suggested by her Muslim name in her writings. She is just an Indian writer writing from Bangalore about the layered urban spaces of contemporary society. The seemingly Muslim name of the central character Qayenaat is deceiving at the first instance for the reader, for her character's father's surname is later revealed in the plot as Gupta. However the nuances of fanatic restrictions imposed in the realm of art by both Muslim and Hindu clerics remain a strong background around the circumstances of Qayenaat's narrative about

unconventional art and Indian society. Qayenaat's friend Sara Mir, a Kashmiri married to a Punjabi in Bangalore is a stock image of the sophisticated feudal class of the connoisseurs of art in post-colonial India who invested their fortune to maintain a taste of good art. The only Muslim female character in the novel is the talented artist Nur Jahan who despite remaining hidden to public glare had to bear the brunt of the fanatics for her bold representations for which she was accused of sedition for defiling Indian womanhood. The narrative maintains a mystery behind Nur Jahan's identity and draws a nexus between her nude paintings to the communal riots in Bombay:

She signed her canvases 'NJ', and was rumoured to be Muslim, so someone nicknamed her Nur Jahan after the self-possessed 16<sup>th</sup>-century Queen. Soon the story had freed itself from the reality altogether and became one about a god-fearing, namaazi woman who led a double life, painting her dirty pictures in secret". (*The Cosmopolitans*, p. 13)

The later part of the novel deals with a murder mystery. Moreover the complexity in the plot is aroused by a stolen painting of Nur Jahan who was eventually killed by the fanatics. Nur Jahan is never shown in the novel as a full bodied character inside the confines of a zenana. The narrator only keeps the reader informed that the artist Nur Jahan lives a reclusive life in Hyderabad with her husband and two kids after the debacle over her amorous paintings. But she steals the center stage of the discussion in the Anjum Hasan's narrative by being invisible as an artist while revealing in absentia through her immortal art "Painting of Sorrow" hidden secretly by Qayenaat following a series of detective thrill in the novel that remained despite Nur Jahan's fatal end at the hand of the fanatics. She was brutally killed with every finger of her hand being chopped off, and the media outrages by fellow artists belonging to Sufia, the Secular United Front of Indian Artists mentioned in the novel were not strong enough for giving her justice by penalizing the culprits. Nur Jahan's murder reflected an ancient pattern of rebellion and revenge as reflected in Anjum Hasan's narrative that caused terrible set back to true connoisseurs of art like her central protagonist Qayenaat who still held an idyllic cosmopolitan belief for a world to be a better place without any religion and its rigid sanctions. The novel ends with the post liberal triumphant artist Baban Reddy's exhibition dedicated in the memory of Nur Jahan the dead uncelebrated artist. It is with his exhibition of his exclusive art work *Nostalgia* that Anjum Hasan began the narrative sequence, enmeshing it with the relations of the heterodox female artist or female admirer of art with the polarized patriarchal society through the complications in the plot of passionate love, childhood tantrums and mid-life stasis chiefly expressed through Qayenaat's consciousness, finally brought to a narrative closure by grappling on the anonymity of the artist and his/her anonymous audience through Baban's paintings drawn in memory of Nur Jahan.

In all the above novels that I have taken for discussion, it is evident that these Muslim women writers focus more on their identity as an Indian rather than their Islamic identity. Even though the first two of these novels are located in an Islamic setting, the central female protagonist in all of them envisions a syncretic and secular ideal of nationhood and individual identity foregrounding the composite Indian culture, Islam being an integral part of the same. *Tara Lane* captures the transition of the Muslim feudal class to the emerging new Muslim middle class with its visible repercussions in the zenana system while *Madras in Rainy Days* contemporizes the present dilemma of an Indian Muslim female subject in dealing with globalized tendencies in a traditionally restrictive social space. The real zenana, a form of indigenous spatiality in the colonial sphere indeed

disappeared with the fall of feudalism in the postcolonial times. Yet the hypostatized presence of the gendered spatial orientations of the zenana existed in “states of mind” in the realm of the imaginary. Purdah or veil became an important marker of Muslim identity which visibly set the Muslims as a social, cultural and religious community apart from other Indians as well as the colonizers in the pre independence India with continued cultural remnants. There is a complex value system in tradition that defines the limits of freedom, demarcates the confines and outlines the margins. As Jasbir Jain and Amina Amin have it these are the margins which confer anonymity and erase selfhood, the margins which limit and stultify and annihilate (*Margins of Erasure* vii). However, the Muslim female is not the central figure in Anjum Hasan’s *The Cosmopolitans* and yet the decentered logo in her novel’s linear progress. The absence of the voice of Muslim female artist Nur Jahan’s in Anjum Hasan’s narrative and her consequent death reiterates postcolonial critic Gayatri Spivak’s rhetorical question “Can the Subaltern Speak?” adjoined by postcolonial feminist Sara Suleri’s proclamation in *Meatless Days* that “there’s no woman in the Third World” (Suleri 10), which suggests ironically that third world Muslim women because of their traditional confinement are denied a visible identity metaphorically and otherwise in the public space of a cosmopolitan world of postmodernity.

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