

Sexing the Karachi City: Gender and Urban Subjectivity in Shandana Minhas' *Tunnel Vision*

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Abstract

This paper locates the positioning of a novel Tunnel Vision by a contemporary Pakistani women writer Shandana Minhas within a zenana sub-culture and look for fissures that make the protagonist embrace or escape her traditional milieu. I use the term zenana not merely as a private quarter within a household separated for women as means of gender seclusion, but as an ideological construct for the psycho-social space of Minhaz's female protagonist Ayesha. Zenana as an ideological structure defines the conceptualization of social, political and personal space for a Muslim woman. The zenana indexes both a particular place and a particular view of one's place in the world. The spatial and cultural codes of secrecy, privacy and modesty are demystified in Minhaz's sexist representation of the city space in Karachi. As the modern South Asian Muslim women slip through the borders of traditional patriarchal control exerted by the institution of zenana, new forms of patriarchal control in terms of choice of sexual behavior, financial restrictions, professional hazards etc emerge as ideological constructs which finds an incisive representation in Minhaz's novel. Her comatose body becomes a site for production of knowledge, conflicting emotions and a shared history where globalization and urbanity restructures the performance of gender, sexuality, religion and class for a modern woman in contemporary Pakistan. The leading woman in the text Ayesha rather than adhering to her religiosity yearn for liberation from the repression of her sexuality and burden of spinsterhood, seek authentic self expression which at most instances is only partially allowed. The issue at hand is to understand on one hand her religious identity as Muslim woman while at the same time to grasp the specificity of her claim to act as a modern subject situated in the time of political and cultural modernity, as seen in the critical religious interrogations of Shandana Minhaz's Tunnel Vision through her representation of sexist and gendered realities in the city space of Karachi. Apart from these issues, the novel is also about Minhaz's love for Karachi. Each chapter begins with an ode to the spirit of the place. From the witty and bizarre one-liners on the rear of auto-rickshaws and trucks to snippets from folk songs make up the title name of the chapters. The titles are a humorous representation of the realities and myths of a spatial urban existence.

Cities are vital arenas in the embodiment, contestation, mobilization, subversion and transformation of all aspects of spatialized dimension of gender. The narrative in *Tunnel Vision* dwells in sexing the city of Karachi as a feminine identity-it 'was a whore, a manmade, man-driven man-gratifying whore (36)' through the comatose consciousness of its chief female subject. Ayesha the chief protagonist identified herself with the city space of Karachi and internalizes the gendered impositions in the restrictive urban space of the Pakistani society. Minhaz's narrative exposes the sexist tendencies in the professional world of Karachi where objectification of women is a part of social discourse. Her comatose state is a metaphorical representation of social deactivation of a woman which acts as a symbolic zenana to curb her agencies as a social being in the public sphere. The spatial and cultural codes that governed the life of zenana women extended beyond the zenana itself through the notion of purdah connoting, not only veil but also secrecy, privacy and modesty that are demystified in Minhaz's sexist representation of the city space in Karachi. As the modern South Asian Muslim women slip through the borders of traditional patriarchal control exerted by the institution of zenana, new forms of patriarchal control in terms of choice of sexual behavior, financial restrictions, professional hazards etc emerge as ideological constructs which finds an incisive representation in Minhaz's novel.

Her comatose body becomes a site for production of knowledge, conflicting emotions and a shared history where globalization and urbanity restructures the performance of gender, sexuality, religion and class for a modern woman in contemporary Pakistan. The prolonged comatose state of Ayesha and the workings of her subconscious mind represents the post modernist angst of an individual in the present world. Here the author indulges in the idea of numbness in dealing with the concerns a fractured identity of a Muslim female subject.

Islam plays a vital role in shaping the identity of a woman in Pakistan. The feminist agenda in contemporary Pakistan is in fact redefined by Islamic feminists like Riffat Hassan and her group who frame the debate on women's rights exclusively around Islamic history, culture and tradition. Though most Pakistani writers have focused on the ideological discourses arising from 'divide and rule' and 'two nation theory' the women writers seem to be an exception in the analysis of the gender politics informing their socio historical circumstances. Muneeza Shamsie in her introduction to an anthology of fiction in English by Pakistani women writers historicizes Muslim women writing English fiction in Pakistan as a colonial legacy and contextualizes the same within the tradition of Indo-Anglian women's writing in British India (Shamsie vi). She considers their choice of English as a medium of expression a "challenge to the stereotypes that patriarchal cultures in Pakistan and the diaspora have imposed on them, both as women and as writers. In this paper I shall locate the positioning of a novel *Tunnel Vision* by a contemporary Pakistani women writer Shandana Minhas within a zenana sub-culture and look for fissures that make the protagonist embrace or escape her traditional milieu. The zenana indexes both a particular place and a particular view of one's place in the world. Shandana Minhas' debut novel, *Tunnel Vision* is a study in the representation of the ideological zenana in urban space interpolated through the comatose consciousness of the central female protagonist Ayesha. Here I redefine zenana as a space, real and apparent- real in the case of those veiled woman who remain confined to its boundaries, while apparent in case of those like Ayesha who don't inhabit a physical zenana or wear Purdah but face problems of identity and agency because of the influential pressures of a colonizing and restrictive tradition. Her comatose body becomes a site for production of knowledge, conflicting emotions and a shared history where globalization and urbanity restructures the performance of gender, religion and class for a modern woman in contemporary Pakistan.

Following the argument of sexing the Karachi city in *Tunnel Vision*, it is noteworthy to bring reference to James Donald's text *Imagining the Modern City*. James Donald has problematized the relationship between the physical and the imaginary -- between the vast arrays of structures of the city (from industrial to the present) and their articulation in the everyday lives of city dwellers. Shandana's focus in the novel shifts toward the subjective experience of the city of Karachi, and the comatose consciousness, receding memory, and processes of imagination rise to the fore of a gendered analysis of the central female protagonist. The city, as James Donald writes, is understood as "a historically specific mode of seeing" (1999: 92), often narrated and described and represented. Ayesha's imaginings during her coma and other experiential processes of her active life in the past that forms the non linear narrative structure have consequences for the type of social, economic, and cultural practices and structures that occur within the city for a modern female Muslim subject. Snippets from popular culture, Urdu proverbs other mass media forms that form the titles of the chapters in the novel mediate these interrelationships between structure and experience in urban space. "Subjectivity" all too often consents to remain an effect of an alien form of representation, whereas "agency" is an attempt to "realize subjectivity as an effect of an authentic act of self-representation that one can call one's own" (Radhakrishnan 755).

Ayesha, a thirty one year old single, working, female Muslim subject situated in the urban locale of Karachi posits an alternate picture of the spatially domesticated place or zenana for a Muslim woman through her agency as a financially independent individual who can exercise her authentic free will. Shandana Minhaz through Ayesha presents the picture of a modern South Asian woman spatially positioned in a globalized financial sector who plays an unconventional role as the bread earner of a family by being a financial head of a multinational company. Notions of "civility" are intricately bound up with notions of "gentility" in South Asia, being historically determined by class, but Ayesha seemed to be an exception. The educated middle class to which a certain group of Muslim women writers, (Minhas included) in South Asia belongs seems to proscribe codes of conduct for women that adhere to specific ideas about "genteel" behavior rather than religion. "An area of special severity is (female) sexuality; a "genteel" woman in South Asian civil society is ideally desexualized in the public perception" (Bose 21). A close study shows the remarkable resilience of South Asian women in their long standing struggle to combat different forms of patriarchal structures and oppression many of which are justified in the name of religion.

Zenana being such a quasi-religious imposition the women who are confined within it create ways to modify and restrict it. Here though Ayesha is presented as a nonconformist yet being under the guard of an imaginary zenana she had to speak out her nonconformist position in muffled voices. It is her comatose state that enabled her to form concrete opinions about her life, relations and social milieu from an impersonal standpoint. The spatial subject position of South Asian Muslim women is typified in Minhas' narrative as poor and oppressed. Ayesha deemed herself to be a cut above the rest of the clan of South Asian women whom she terms as an 'oppressed' breed 'forever cursing their lot' amidst a phallogocentric world. She saw herself as incompatible for the socially superior Saad because their class difference would only reiterate her place as an oppressed woman which she vehemently challenged. As a professionally qualified woman she voices the spatial constraints faced by a woman in her workplace, merely for the reason of being a female despite intellectual competency. Zarmeena Mushabir on *News on Sunday* writes:

Minhas has written what was inside her and it may not be her best work. She told the story as it came to her and not as it would be more pleasing to the readers. Her central character, Ayesha is a complex woman proposing one man, rejecting another, violently reaching to sexual harassment at the workplace, and shouting abuses at street vendors in Khori Gardens. The author did give a realistic outlook of life in the city of Karachi but some illegitimate relationships have been exaggerated a bit too far. Moreover, some unimportant characters have been added unnecessarily, which has made the story weak.

The beginning of the novel presents how Ayesha Siddiqui crashes through the windshield of her green Alto at a busy traffic intersection in Karachi and thereafter drifts into an indefinite state of coma. In her unconscious state as she lays unconscious to the world, Ayesha strokes back in her reverie the complicated relationships of her personal and professional life. The tumultuous, bitter exchanges with Ammi, Abba – a partly missing chapter, Adil, the brother and the men whom interested her, Omar and Saad, are re-lived and mulled over in her subconscious. The spatial productions of gender discrimination among the general public finds sarcastic representation in the mob reaction to the accident. None except a middle aged man and a eunuch came to her rescue simply because the men were honor bound and touching a young woman was forbidden notwithstanding the fact that she was on the verge of death and desperately needed help. The narrative in which the protagonist's coma screens all attempts by the world to connect with her, even as she tunes in to the monologues and dialogues around her seems to have multi-layered meanings. The coma represents the post modernist angst of the present world where the author indulges in the idea of numbness in dealing with the concerns a fractured identity of a Muslim female subject.

The need for a protective male figure goes against the trends of feminist agenda that Minhas wishes to narrativize through the novel. P. Anima's article "Light beyond the Tunnel" in the Nov 15 2007 edition of *The Hindu* quotes Shandana thus: "It was not a conscious attempt. I just told a story that came to me". In the same article while discussing the lack of impressive male subjects in the novel Minhas' position is quoted thus:

There is always a missing father figure when it comes to Pakistani women. It reflects the absence of a benevolent protector. The "father figure" who will protect and help is what is absent. (Anima 2)

Keeping in view Minhas' representation of the lack of male authority in Ayesha's life, a Kritevan and Lacanian model can be brought to comparison. Julia Kristeva in "Women's Time" talks of the semiotic stage which debunks the Lacanian model of the Symbolic realm or the Law of the father that dominates language. The symbolic realm in Lacan is attained after the mirror stage when the 'I' attains language and thereby attains the Law of the father, where the phallus is the privileged signifier which represses all the desires of going back to the mother. According to Kristeva the road to go back to the archaic mother is paved by this semiotic stage which the Lacanian model denies. Minhas on the other hand deems the Law of the Father as an essential requirement. This shows the legitimating crisis faced by a woman who points out at the fissures in a patriarchal domain yet at the same time self contradictorily craves for patriarchal authority. Ayesha's father mysteriously disappears one morning leaving the family to depend on her maternal uncles. It forces Ayesha to grow up faster, and youth and responsibility is intertwined with a souring relationship with her Ammi. Her father had been her constant source of inspiration, one which instilled in her the belief that her role existed outside the spatial domestication of the 'home' in the wide world 'abroad'. On the contrary her mother typified the spatialized mechanism of lack of power and agency that generically characterizes the gendered identity of a South Asian woman in Minhas' view. Despite being an educated woman her mother never crossed the domesticated space of her home to take up a job to gain financial power and agency to sustain the family after her husband walked off on her.

Rather embodying the spatially gendered position of a dependent female she unquestionably demanded the financial assistance of her younger brother. For her education was an embellishment to her role of being a good homemaker who is traditionally confined to the domesticated space of the threshold, as such she judged her own daughter's embodied identity in the public sphere of the workplace with much distrust. Moreover the strained relationship between Ayesha and her mother is also suggestive of the move away from the mother according to Lacanian phallogocentrism. A similar discordance between mother and daughter is also seen in Tehmina Durrani's *My Feudal Lord*.

Tradition plays the pivotal role in this mother daughter discordance as the former makes it redundant on the latter to maintain status quo notwithstanding that the transitional phases makes the world outside move at a faster pace while their psychic domains still bear layers of confinement. In case of Ayesha and her mother the focal point of discord was the missing protector and provider, the Archetypal male figure of the house. Both blamed each other for his absence from their lives. The mystery of his whereabouts is never disclosed in the narrative, but Ayesha holds her mother's nature as responsible for his move. Though bearing independent individual agency, Ayesha lacks the intricate bond with her mother and is trapped in the patriarchal legacy of distrusting women by considering her mother as the root cause of all her negative attitude. As a child she had kept the secret of her father's indulgence with the photos of nude women from her mother. She had even witnessed the illicit relation of her father with their maid Nasreen but the narrative dismisses all the evidences of his betrayal as some passing error while at the same time dealing her mother's reactions to the same as cynical outburst. The narrative voice is sarcastic at every level for Jahan's idiosyncrasies, whilst there is a visible rationalization of the father's position, the male provider and protector who left his family in doldrums for commitments elsewhere.

There is a discursive internalization of patriarchy in the structure of the narrative, and the fissures between the mother and daughter is only a symbolic representation of the same. In her father's absence the adolescent Ayesha rejects her mother's position as the subsequent head of the family and the latter too fails to acknowledge her as the financial head after she gets a job. All is the pull of the power nexus as both of them competed with one another for the seat of power in absence of the legitimate dominant male figure. *Tunnel Vision* also throws light on the patriarchal fabric of the Pakistani society. But significantly, Minhas brings out the "missing father figure" in a culture widely believed to be staunchly patriarchal. At another level, the absence of a "benevolent protector" seems to be the enduring bruise in a country battered by military coups and instability. The male figures make a late entry in the novel, as they are not central to the story. *Tunnel Vision* is the about the mother and daughter and their difficult bond a somewhat altered representation of the "cathexis between mother and daughter" which Adriene Rich talks about. Minhas suggests that women are at many instances responsible for themselves as subordinate gendered subjects that fail in challenging male discourse because of mutual discordances through fault-finding and arguments. There is a lack of acknowledgement between the two central female figures in the novel which is the crux of their complicated relationship. Towards the end of the narrative Ayesha's mother rationalizes her daughter's unmarried status as an outcome of the family's financial concerns for which she had to take up a job rather than settle down in marriage as a plea for the former's growing age before Saad's mother. The acknowledgement came in the hope of winning her daughter a marriage proposal from Saad's mother, yet it resolved to a great extent the breach between the two.

Issues like feminine agency and sexuality that entail particular interrogations like women's sexual rights and reconstituting of independent identities in ways that blur the line between the religious and the secular in contemporary urban space is visibly marked in Ayesha's subjectivity. Geraldine Pratt says that "giving agency to sexuality veils and perpetuates the working of power" (Pratt 14). The leading woman in the text Ayesha rather than adhering to her religiosity yearn for liberation from the repression of her sexuality and burden of spinsterhood, seek authentic self expression which at most instances is only partially allowed. The issue at hand is to understand on 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, as seen in the critical religious interrogations of Shandana Minhas's *Tunnel Vision* through her representation of sexist and gendered realities in the city space of Karachi. Apart from these issues, the novel is vibrant about Minhas' love for Karachi. Each chapter begins with an ode to the spirit of the place. From the witty and bizarre one-liners on the rear of auto-rickshaws and trucks to snippets from folk songs make up the title name of the chapters.

The titles are a humorous representation of the realities and myths of a spatial urban existence. The author confesses in an interview given to *The Hindu* that there are autobiographical strains in the tale in love for Karachi, the anger and the duality is there. It is her ode to Karachi despite a lot of misconceptions about the city.

Though Karachi is associated with terrorism, Minhas' narrative shows that there is a lot of humor, joy and aspiration too dwelling in the city space. Karachi, the British Empire's largest grain exporting port and Pakistan's commercial hub, is a melting pot beset by lawlessness, ethnic and sectarian bloodshed, and extremism in the wake of the US-led war on terror. Despite abundant reporting on the city's strife, scant attention is paid to the micro-mechanisms that maintain peace where, since the 1970s, drab concrete high-rise apartment buildings have drawn families into smaller units, and strangers into new relations of proximate living and neighboring. For anthropologist Laura A. Ring, the Shipyard, one such building inhabited by low-paid government workers, wives who stay home, and children, is a site for researching and theorizing women's efforts to create familiar forms of sociability in the midst of uncertain risks and cautious suspicions of others (Ring 10).

The familiar Karachi roads which were her sole companion in moments of crisis suddenly reached a point of defamiliarization on the day of her accident. After her rift with Saad that morning the roads had estranged her and the accident occurred. Minhas's narrative exposes the sexist tendencies exemplified in the character of her lecherous boss and similar male colleagues in her professional space in the city of Karachi where objectification of women is a part of social discourse. Through the vision of Ayesha as a young girl the narrative shows how gender constructs are inculcated in the mind of a young female child even in a city. As a small girl she seemed to be inquisitive as to why women and men had to maintain different dress code where women had to stick to tradition while men had the liberty to choose western clothes. Moreover Ayesha's independent position as a technocrat and her diligence at work was unfavourable to many of her male counterparts.

It's noteworthy to take a critical stance on the protagonist's Islamic identity, because although she carries a Muslim name and belongs to an Islamic state the narrative doesn't figure her as a practicing good Muslim. The novel is sarcastic of the zenana subculture manifested in the representations of exclusive female gatherings like *Milad soires* or *Khatams* as pseudo kitty parties rather than devotional congregations where the women are more concerned with their 'fabrics of hijab', jewellery, or culinary specialties rather than religious piety. Not to speak of maintaining the codes of purdah or zenana, she even hinders from taking the name of God in her mind to keep her safe during her comatose state. The comatose position incapacitated her physical abilities rendering her into the cultural stereotype of a helpless woman which mocked her role as the Alpha female in her professional world. The coma made her the local female ideal-"Pretty. Pliant. Docile. Accepting (64)". - The perfect marriage material for an honor bound Muslim society.

The narrative voice presents the whole concept of marriage as a 'mass hysteria' among Pakistani women from which the protagonist wished to escape. There were manifold effects of this mass hysteria among the educated class of Pakistani woman- for those without jobs it was financial security, again for those with jobs it was a source of double income, while for a number of college going teenagers it was the ticket out of the dictatorial presence of conservative parents into the liberal world of benevolent partners. For Ayesha all these considerations were inadequate as marriage for her was a diminishing of individualism. "Women often get married for the wrong reasons," says Minhas. In between growing up, matrimony and the daily grind, women have little time to come into their own, she adds, pointing out where the flaws lie. According to the author, Ayesha's love interests, Saad and Omar give her the "quick-fix" solutions, as she is often driven to find a man and "settle down." She started abhorring marriage because of the broken home of her parents added on by the death of her closet friend Kulsum due to domestic violence. But in her cultural context an unmarried woman became the cynosure of all eyes and due to the constant reminder of her growing age by her mother she hoped to settle down with Saad. The moment she came closer to the idea by proposing Saad at the instigation of her mother, she was almost out of her mind. She inversed the gender role by being the initiator but at the same time couldn't bear the ignominy of the same because she as an otherwise pragmatic individual exhibited a self contradictory stance in a moment of emotional overbalance. She left Saad in the midst of an argument to go off for a rash drive in the same roads of her beloved Karachi which now seemed defamiliarized leading to the accident.

The novel locates the place of a Muslim woman in an urban situation where she is no longer bound in the four walls of the zenana, yet the spatial connotations of the same remained in the consciousness of her values. The freedom she enjoys becomes a cause for gossip and undue concern. Her comatose state is a metaphorical representation of social deactivation of a woman which acts as a symbolic zenana to curb her agencies as a social being in the public sphere. Minhas finally chooses the narrative convenience of making her protagonist come out of coma in the presence of the two important male figures of her life- Saad her lover sitting close to her and her father at some distance outside the cabin. Though the novel maintained a nonconformist overtone to a great extent the end suggests Ayesha's fashioning into the spatialized social canon by a union with Saad which would finally erase the blemish of her unmarried status. And provide the needed requirement of a legitimate male protector to guard her sexual and social concerns. This once again confirms the assumption that the imaginary zenana is reinstated even in modernized urban spaces keeping in view the religious structure of the Pakistani society.

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