



Short Review Paper

The Conflicts of Muslim Women in Samina Ali's *Madras on Rainy Days*

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Abstract

This paper aims to shed light on the conflicts of Muslim women in Samina Ali's Madras on Rainy Days. The novel deals with the limitations placed on both men and women, but more on women by misguided societal expectations. Here, Samina Ali explores the conflict between tradition, culture, and modernity. Layla, the protagonist of the novel, is modern, American-born, yet forced to go for an arranged marriage with a traditional Muslim boy from India. The novel displays the conflict of Layla's mother also after the second marriage of her husband for the quest for a male child as she was unable to give birth to a male child. There are many other female characters in the novel that go through several conflicts. In Samina Ali's words, "Muslim women were usually associated with words such as submissive and extremist", but this novel gives a new voice to Muslim women.

Keywords: Muslim women, conflict, tradition, modernity.

Introduction

Madras on Rainy Days is a novel by Samina Ali, an American author-activist born in India. In 2004, Samina Ali received the Rona Jaffe Foundation Writers Award. One year later, *Madras on Rainy Days* was awarded the Prix du Premier Roman Etranger award from France in 2005. In July 2005, *Madras on Rainy Days* was chosen as the best debut novel of the year by Poets and Writers magazine, and it was also the debut novel of Samina Ali.

According to Jaswinder Gundra in his Book review, Multicultural Review Fall, Samina Ali has written a gripping tale that is full of psychological insights and a profound understanding of the conflicts that plague everyone who lives in two worlds¹.

Madras on Rainy Days is a sad and heart-touching tale about Layla, the book's protagonist, who has a twin personality that is equal parts Indian and American. Her mother wants her to marry a traditional Muslim boy from India so that she can live a traditional Muslim Indian life. She doesn't want her to stay in America.

Layla is torn between her identities as an independent young American woman and an obedient Muslim daughter. So, she agrees to her mother's wish for her to leave America and enter into an arranged marriage². Through this novel, Samina Ali explores the difficulties of living behind the veil (chador), whether done so in the name of tradition, society, or custom.

Women Characters in the Novel

The novel opens with an image of Layla, who is in Hyderabad's Old City, and the preparations for a marriage are taking place in the old house of Layla's father. Layla was unaware of the customs and rituals of Indian Muslim marriage; she was forced to be in a bedroom till the day of marriage and was not allowed to show her face until the day of Nikah (marriage), because it was considered to be inauspicious to show a bride's face before a few days of marriage. Layla was suddenly thought to be possessed by Shaitan (the devil) by Amme and other elders of the family, as she was bleeding continuously. Of course, the reason was different, but her mother and other family members thought that she was possessed and therefore bleeding continuously.

Layla's mother takes her to a blind Alim, believing that she is possessed. This was not the first visit to the Alim, but this time they have come to the Alim, since Layla was bleeding, thinking that the reason for the bleeding was her possession. This time the Alim advises them to take Layla to a good doctor. Layla has had to visit the Alim whenever she travels from America to Hyderabad. As she had grown up in American culture, she was unable to understand these visits to the Alim. But the reality was only known to Layla, in her words:

"I was no longer the girl others imagined me to be. I was not going to my husband as a virgin. And the bleeding, it was not demonic. It was a dying baby. Nate's. I had gotten pregnant. An accident, conceived in haste or in good times"³.

Nate was an American black boy whom Layla befriended. He used to visit Layla's place every night through the window of the room. Layla also loved him, but Layla never wanted to hurt her mother because her mother had been ill since the day of her father's second marriage. Layla knew that her mother would not accept this relationship because she wanted a traditional Muslim boy for Layla to marry, as her mother always used to say her that her spouse will be a doctor or an engineer. Her spouse will come from a respectable family. She will marry a Muslim. Her spouse will be an Indian. Since she was a young child, she had been hearing her mother say these words⁴.

She was afraid to reveal this sexual relationship to her mother. But many times, she tries to reveal this truth before her mother, but as she says: "I would have confessed everything to her right then and willingly accepted her judgement of me. But he was there, as someone always seemed to be in India. Hardly any privacy. So, I had no time to tell Amme the truth"³.

Layla is also conflicted with the concept of covering the body, and she thinks that being in Chador the women will be more conscious of their bodies and the bodies of the men. In the words of Layla:

"I felt more desire wrapped in the chador, more aware that I was a woman, and he, simply by the fate of his being man, wanted me. So, I sometimes met their curious gaze, even followed them, with my eyes, admiring their rounded shoulders, their rigid chins, their hairy chests and forearms, their hands. From what better place to notice a man's body than from behind the chador"³.

Layla is not only confused with two countries' cultures, but she is also confused with her own personality and her existence. Even she could not recognise the woman she had become. She resembled the moon's two faces, new and full, with one always veiled behind the other

She was living a different life in America, and now that she is getting married and spending time with her future husband's family in India, she senses the other woman within her beginning to awaken.

After the marriage of Layla, when Layla enters the new home, the members of her Sus'ral (in-laws' house) ask her to read the Quran. She was unable to read Arabic, and she feels uncomfortable saying this and feels this environment is alien to her, but at the same time, she sees a white shirt and black polished bright shoes as her own, because this was a common outfit in American culture. Layla is conflicted with culture, religion, and family.

When she comes to know that Sameer cannot ever consummate the marriage with Layla because he has a male lover, Naveed, they loved each other. When Layla comes to know about this relationship, she leaves Sameer and goes to her Myka, where

TaqiMamu, her uncle, was staying, and reveals this bitter truth about Sameer before him, but her uncle says: "What! Are you not listening to me? Layla, I have brought you out here to talk some sense into you. Ar're, you cannot leave the boy over such a small thing! so what if he had... recreational sex?"³.

Layla was expecting a different kind of reaction from her uncle, he would say that he didn't know about this, or Islam has a strict prohibition against such men, or he may worry about her reputation as a woman or even society's expectations and concerns from such a marriage, but she gets the opposite reaction from his uncle. Then, losing hope in her uncle, she tells TaqiMamu that she wants to talk to Ameera Auntie. But he says:

"No one wants a daughter to return home—especially not under these circumstances. Ar're, think about your father. Are you going to be like him, deserting your spouse, ruining your reputation? Spread what you want about your husband, Layla, everybody will say you left a decent man to return to your Umrikan lover. It is what your husband will spread about you, as any man would. So, you see, there is no need to talk to Ameera Auntie or your Asma Kala. You will not get the support of women here. We all agree this is just a marital spat—nothing out of the ordinary. With Nafiza dying, this is already a sad time; no one wants to be thinking about this... filth. You're married, Layla, that's it. You're married"³.

The novel begins with Layla in possession; there are numerous factors that control Layla, such as cultural, traditional, familial, and religious forces, among others. She starts to differentiate between Islam as a religion along with Islam as it is practiced by society as she reads through the novel's life. In the end, her education in religion aids in her development of self-control. Consider how you have given up your freedom in response to this external pressure, regardless of the methods your religion, culture, family, or society uses to control the populace.

Fortunately, Layla in the book finds her true freedom and declares that only she owns her body, which is hidden and safe beneath the chador. This is because she wanted freedom for herself.

The Muslim veil has long been perceived by the West as a restrictive tool. Still, the chador gives Layla the freedom she has been waiting for in this situation. Regardless of the veil, being half Indian and half American.

Layla's mother (Marium) conflicts with her marriage, when her husband marries for the second time to Sabana in the quest for a male child because Layla's mother was unable to get pregnant for the second time because of health complications. Her father divorced his first wife, and he has made two separate houses for both wives. He used to be with the second wife, Shabana. Since then, her mother was in a bedroom and never came out, away from the outer world, Lyla's mother lost

importance in her husband's life soon after the second marriage, so she is psychologically struggling with her emotions, but she cannot express them before her husband since he is taking care of her daughter, and she is afraid of him. As Layla says: "In truth, Amme couldn't stop him. She was not even allowed to utter his name, so how could she dare utter a word against his?"³.

Even Layla, as a child at a tender age, needed her mother's love, care, and understanding, but her mother made herself be alone, even not taking care of her only girl child after her husband's second marriage. It took her several years to come out of this trauma. Now, after many years, Layla's mother has come out of the room to prepare for the marriage of her only child. As Layla says: "It had only happened in the past ten years, since dad took on a second wife and Amme finally came out of the bedroom, skinnier, dried out, and no longer able to endure losing faith"³.

Whenever the family comes to India, Layla and her mother have a separate room, and her mother's old room, in which she had come as a new bride, is given to the second wife Sabana her husband and their two sons in Hyderabad's old house. Layla's Amme, who had been divorced for many years but still, is not happy. She was finding peace in prayer; it was the only power available, prayer to God.

After the completion of all the rituals of her daughter's marriage, Layla's Amme had no reason to live in India. Where as Sabana, the second wife, was pregnant for the third time, so for her pregnancy and care, Sabana was left in India. And now Layla's mother has become the child taker of two sons of Sabana and her husband, who have left for the USA. Layla's mother has only this position and place in her husband's life after her daughter's marriage; she had no other purpose in her life. She has to just leave this complex world of men's dominance. As Layla says:

"My mother returned to the U.S. with my father. They went back the same day we came here. She denies to me that she wants him back as her husband, but he's the only thing she craves. Now she's going to watch his sons. The surrogate mother, the surrogate wife, without Sabana there-without me there-she's going to finally live out the fantasy of how her family should have been." I smirked, adding, "I can't believe she still loves him"³.

Henna, a cousin and best friend of Layla, married at a very young age. Before Layla, though she was younger than Layla, she'd done everything first, whether it was walking, riding a bike, starting her menses, marriage, or having a child. Henna is where Layla used to get advice. She is married, but soon after the marriage, her husband left her in India and went to Saudi Arabia for a livelihood. Her in-laws have sold all her belongings, which she had brought into her marriage as dowry. They made her like their house servant when her husband went back to Saudi Arabia, living her alone with his parents. Even

during her pregnancy, she had to work like an animal. So, her husband came to know about this treatment with his wife, and he revealed this condition to Henna's parents, and they got her back to their house. Since then, Henna has been living with her parents. Henna is conflicted with her condition, without her husband, as she is not happy without him living alone with her parents. As she says:

"Everyone in the Old City knows. Wherever I go, women have questions or advice. They blame me or they pity me. It's become so hard; I don't want to leave the house"³.

When her husband Hanif returns from Saudi Arabia, even though it was not tolerated by Hanif's parents, they never wanted to give Henna this happy life with her husband, and it was because of them that he was forcibly going to earn money in Saudi Arabia. But unfortunately, in the partition clashes in India, Henna gets raped and murdered brutally, so this was the pathetic end of Henna's life with her child in her womb.

Sabana second wife, even though she did not have that good status in her husband's life, and he was married to her, for a male child which she has given. She has to take care of her husband in all the ways like a maid. She is still young and beautiful. But her three pregnancies made her look old before her age. After Layla's marriage, she is left in India for her third delivery for better care in the old house of her husband. And her husband went to the USA with his two sons and Layla's mother.

Nafiza, Layla's nanny, was taking care of Layla like her own daughter Roshan from her birth; she has never made a difference between Layla and her daughter Roshan. She has managed to help with all the arrangements for Layla's marriage, and she went to Layla's in-laws' house on the wedding day with Layla, to do the household work. She was the only one who knew everything about Layla and her pregnancy, about Sameer's unusual behaviour towards Layla, or the behaviour between husband and wife. As Layla says: "You said you would protect me, Nafisa, as you used to when I was a little girl. What will you do if he doesn't want me as his wife?" But even as I asked it, I knew there was nothing she could do. A woman, a servant, what power had she?"³.

Nafiza, being a woman, never cared about her health. Though she was struggling with health issues, she never went to a doctor. At last, she died in the hospital, and nobody attended her funeral, neither Layla, Sameer, nor the families. These working women, who have been working in the old house of Layla since a very young age, did not get any attention. And even they had conflicts in their minds sometimes about going to rest for some time in their children's house. Which they never revealed before their owners, whether it was Nafisa, Raga, or Roshan.

Zeba Layla's very religious mother-in-law she is conflicted about the duties of a mother to her elder son. Even though she is aware of her son's reality, she tries to convince Layla that only

the wife has the ability to awaken her husband. She doesn't like Sameer because of his unacceptable personality in society. As a woman, she would have never destroyed the life of Layla, as her son was not able to consummate the marriage with Layla. Even though she hates her son because of his unacceptable personality, and she prays that he would have died in that bike accident in which he had a little problem in his limb, as a mother, she did not give him proper treatment to recover from this accident. Since then, Sameer has also had a grievance with his mother. And she always follows the couple and interrupts them every time so that Layla never comes across the truth about his son. She arranged this marriage not for his son but to show off to society that she has a son, not a gay one, especially by inviting more than a thousand guests to Walima (the reception). And she was worried about her second son's marriage. If everyone comes to know the truth, who will marry his second son? That is why she tells Layla to take Sameer to the USA, and for her, Sameer is dead. As she says,

"Islam says that when a man mounts another man, the throne of Allah shakes. Imagine the trembling of a mother's heart. I have cursed him. Cursed my own son. That day, when I was told of his motorcycle accident, I rejoiced. I prayed a *Shukran namaz*," a prayer of Thanksgiving, "before I went to the hospital. I was prepared that day to see his dead face. It was Allah's punishment. He was coming back from that park, from doing what he does there, when he got into the accident. I thought Allah had finally answered my prayers"³.

Conclusion

In this novel, Samina Ali shows the conflicts of Muslim women in society. How the society ruins one's life to have that social status in this society again. Though Layla is an American-born girl, her family forced her to accept the traditional Muslim society of India⁵. But a woman always wants her freedom, and Layla finds it in the veil of being in public, still invisible from the eyes of people, and she uses this as a prison and escapes from this society instead of being in this forced marriage with a gay and the novel concludes with this sentence: "My body is hidden and safe under the chador, belonging only to me"³.

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