

Portrayal of Muslim women in Samina Ali's *Madras on rainy days*

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Samina Ali was born in Hyderabad and raised in the United States. Her debut novel, *Madras on Rainy Days* was awarded the Prix Premier Roman Etranger 2005 Award by France and was also chosen as the finalist for both PEN Award and the California Book Reviewers Award. Samina has been involved with prominent Muslim organization in the U.S to help the national dialogue about Islam and especially the perception of Muslim women.

Madras on Rainy Days is an incredibly contemplative story about life for a young Muslim woman living in modern –day India. The novel is a lyrical debut, exploring the dilemma confronting Layla, a second generation Indian-American Muslim. Though Layla, the protagonist has spent much of her life in United States she has spent on equal time in India and thus is torn between two worlds. She is denied many of the freedoms of a young American woman by her parents. As a dutiful Muslim daughter and an independent young American, Layla is torn between clashing identities. She reluctantly agrees to her parents' wish for her to leave America and submit to an arranged marriage. Layla enters into the closed world of tradition and ritual as the wedding preparation gets underway in Hyderabad. Tradition has always been a staunch tool in a patriarchal society to subjugate women.

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religious violence is an ever present threat. Divorce in the Muslim community and what it means for a man and woman going through it, is also discussed.

One of the central themes of the novel is entrapment. Women can never be independent in Muslim society. It is also the story of the dilemma facing every immigrant family in this country, in balancing the values of competing cultural heritage. Samina Ali portrays this culture with great sensitivity in her debut novel *Madras on Rainy Days*. She is the voice of the masses of Muslim women who are both invisible and mute.

Samina Ali's *Madras on Rainy Days* recalls the author's childhood and adolescence living in 1970's Minneapolis. Ali's writing approach, careful selection of words and phrases, character placement and dialogue draw the reader further and further into the unfolding story and its events. *Madras on Rainy Days* opens with the celebration of a wedding between Layla, a nineteen year old college student, and Sameer, an ambitious engineer. The five-day ceremony is lush with the rich traditions of the families' Muslim culture in the Indian walled city of Hyderabad. Layla on her previous trip to America gets romantically and sexually involved with a student named Nate. Now she is to be married to a man she hardly knows. Layla is defiant about the union, the family has so carefully arranged for her. It could be dangerous for her if her lost virginity and pregnancy are revealed.

Layla, a young Muslim-American woman, has returned to her family's home in Hyderabad, India for an arranged marriage. Though she has agreed to the marriage, she lost her virginity before leaving the United States and became pregnant. She terminated the pregnancy, but she is still suffering from its aftereffects while trying to hide her condition from those around her. Layla, Ali's protagonist has been exposed, like her creator, to both Hyderabad Muslim culture and the egalitarian Western culture of Minneapolis. Her parents choose a Hyderabad Muslim groom, Sameer, for her who turns out to be a closeted homo sexual. Layla is insecure about her identity.

A marriage, even an arranged marriage, seems like a stable alternative in Layla's search for both home and parents. If her previous sexual experience becomes public, not only Layla's husband rejects her, but her father will be at liberty to abuse and even to kill her. Layla successfully conceals her previous relationship. She 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. She feels 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.

Even the language reflects how a woman is defined only by her relationship to others. The women are made to serve their men and men to trouble the women. The women are always

considered inferior to men. According to Islam, it is considered improper for women to look into men's eyes if they are not married. Women are trapped in *burkhas* without considering their age.

This was a Muslim neighborhood, where women did not leave the house unveiled, not even girls as young as six, and their bodies yet indistinguishable from boys (58).

Henna was the other woman character referred in the novel. Her husband went to Saudi where he could not take her with him, she had to live as a servant to her in-laws. He could come back to her only after completion of two years when he could enjoy a holiday for a month only. Even the property given to her by her father was taken away to sell, breaking the rules of Islam. So it was hard life for her. She says to Layla:

"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" (63).

After Layla's marriage, Zeba, her mother-in-law told her that only the wife has the power to rouse her husband. When Layla went to the Pizza place with her husband, she saw girls who were more free and frank than in America. Both husband and wife go to Madras for honeymoon, they discover the terrible truth about each other. Sameer knows that Layla was pregnant with another man's child and Layla knows that Sameer is a gay. Hence, he could not make love to her. She then comes to know that he loves Navneed his friend of the same sex. She goes back to her home in Hyderabad and tells her uncle that she doesn't want to go back to her in laws as her husband is unable to love her. But, she is again sent to her husband's house where she is locked inside the room so that she may not run away. She again and again asks her in laws that she wants to go back as it is a sin to sleep with such person, but her father-in-law insists her take Sameer with her to America so that no one will know anything about him. This is how a woman has no place in her home. She is used for others sake only without thinking about her life. She has to marry Sameer without having a feeling of love for him, only for the satisfaction of others. To whom she loved she could not marry because of the tradition. She accepts Sameer whole- heartedly as a husband but she, herself, is unfortunate enough to have such a husband who confesses once to her.

The imaginary world about marriage has been shattered by the arranged marriage of Layla. After marriage she realizes that it is a difficult journey for her to co-up with an extended family. Layla finds that Islam provides her life with a safety net, a sense of belonging that she has never experienced. And so she falls in love not only with her husband, but with her husband's family. She understands that being a Muslim is different from being an Islam. True essence of it is not followed but it becomes just following tradition and rituals. Nobody is willing to believe or understand Layla.

When she happens to know the secret behind Sameer that he is homosexual, she shares it with her parents but they refused to believe her. They compel her to live with him. She is denied the right of being away from her husband whereas men can divorce and get married many times. They want the proof from her for Sameer cannot have sex with her.

How can she give proof? She underwent the terrible demonization of women in compelling her to live with him. Everyone demands her to stay with the marriage in spite of the fiasco. Despite their pledge after the wedding festivities to leave the past alone when their secrets are revealed they cause

significant tension between husband and wife who aim to end their marriage. In the family tradition these problems don't simply exist between Layla and Sameer but rather become a matter of discussion and problem solving for both extended families and even the neighborhood itself. As a result, the situation suppresses only the protagonist to bear everything in silence. Samina Ali carefully portrays the deeply felt and suffered rebellion by the female protagonist against the entire system of social relationship.

Madras on Rainy Days is a deeply feminist novel with richly drawn and complicated characters. Samina Ali explores culture conditions with sensitivity. Her story takes us into the closed world behind a Muslim woman's veil. This novel is a portrayal of a modern Muslim woman who has to make the way in the world. Samina wants her readers to see ordinary Muslims. Muslim men are seen as terrorists and evil controlling and dominating women. Muslim women are seen as sexually repressed and uneducated and their bodies and movements controlled. Samina Ali paints a somber and sinister portrait of the restrictive Muslim customs and religious beliefs that void the freedom of Layla and other women in general. In addition, the centuries-old feuding between Hindus and Muslim in India puts women in peril and dangerous situation if they are found without adequate protection of men.

References

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