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Research Article

Intersectionalism and Masculinity in Anjum Hasan's *The Cosmopolitans*

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ABSTRACT

Anjum Hasan's *The Cosmopolitans* is a collection of humorous short stories that provides insights into the contemporary political, socio-economic, and cultural environments in India. The short stories pay special attention to how women interpret and position themselves in terms of gender, class, and other forms of cultural affiliations through the framework of intersectionality. This study offers a critical assessment of gendered experiences in Indian literature through a feminist reading of the short stories, and particularly, the female protagonists. The paper reflects on how interlocking systems of oppression, as reflected in the short stories, shape female characters' lives by drawing on Kimberlé Crenshaw's intersectionality theory. The discussion centres on selected short stories, such as *Nostalgia*, which sheds light on the challenges female artists face in Bangalore in the presence of patriarchal norms. The paper also analyses the financial insecurities of characters such as Qayenaat, who suffer from systemic forms of financial marginalisation. *Art is Long*, on the other hand, highlights the community's conflict between art and cultural norms through the



censure of artists, including Nur Jahan. *Hegira*, on the other hand, reflects on the feminised trauma marginalised women face in political violence. This study contextualises Hasan's work within the larger context of feminist literary criticism and postcolonial studies by highlighting the importance of intersectionality in understanding the lived experiences of marginalised individuals. The paper, thus, shows how Hasan's work complicates victimhood and resistance narratives by engaging with tradition and modernity. Therefore, *The Cosmopolitans* is a subversive narrative that challenges the dominant cultural discourses and, as a result, demands that the reader face systemic inequalities in the present-day Indian social milieu.

KEYWORDS: Gender; Intersectionality; Cultural identity; Marginalisation; Tradition and Modernity

FULL PAPER

Introduction

Anjum Hasan's *The Cosmopolitans* is a collection of short stories that explores the complexities of power, identity, and social dynamics in contemporary India. These stories weave together themes of gender, class, and cultural belonging, which shape the experiences of a diverse group of characters. By examining the intersections of identity markers, Hasan reveals the often-overlooked perspectives of women navigating India's changing social, political, and economic spheres. According to pioneering feminist scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw,

In "Intersectionality as a Buzzword: A Sociology of Science Perspective on What Makes a Feminist Theory Successful," it is imperative to examine "the myriad ways in which race and gender interact to shape the multiple dimensions of Black women's employment experiences" (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 139).

This intersectional approach, which considers the interaction of numerous coexisting oppressive systems, is essential for examining the gendered perspectives of Hasan's protagonists. The stories in *The Cosmopolitans* challenge stereotypical representations of femininity and provide a more comprehensive understanding of the diverse challenges faced by Indian women by highlighting the interconnections between gender, class, and cultural identity.

Literature Review:

A significant portion of the challenges that subaltern groups encounter in asserting their agency and voices within the current social and political frameworks has been emphasised by academics such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Spivak, 1988). Hasan's narratives may be perceived as engaging with Spivak's work because they offer

a counter-narrative to the prevailing perceptions of Indian culture. This is a result of their nuanced depictions of the lives of women from a diverse range of social and cultural contexts.

In addition to these theoretical frameworks, the writings of Hasan are informed by a rich tradition of Indian literary fiction that has addressed gender and intersectionality. For years, authors such as Arundhati Roy, Anita Desai, and Githa Hariharan have been commended for their unwavering portrayals of women's lived experiences, which have been found to subvert prevailing patriarchal norms and offer alternative perspectives on the complexities of identity and power (Roy, 1997; Desai, 1980; Hariharan, 1992). As a contemporary extension of this literary tradition, Hasan's *The Cosmopolitans* expands upon the works of her predecessors while offering a unique and sophisticated analysis of how gender interacts with other identity identifiers to impact the lives of Indian women.

Nevertheless, Hasan's work is also indicative of the growing body of academic writing that has investigated the process by which gender and intersectionality are contested and expressed in Indian cities. Scholars such as Partha Chatterjee, Asher Ghertner, and Abdou Maliq Simone have studied the intricate relationship between urbanisation, marginalisation, and the production of space, which Hasan's subtle portrayals of characters navigating the rapidly changing cityscapes of Bangalore and other urban centres are consistent with (Chatterjee, 2004; Ghertner, 2015; Simone, 2010). Hasan's narratives may be perceived as addressing these academic discussions and offering a literary perspective on the intersectional challenges encountered by women in the context of India's urban transformation. This perspective emphasises how the built environment both reflects and perpetuates gender- and class-based hierarchies.

Hasan's work may be considered to be part of the growing body of feminist literary criticism and theory, which has endeavoured to examine how gender, class, and power interact to influence the lived experiences of Indian women. Scholars, including Tanika Sarkar, Kumkum Sangari, and Radha Kumar, have all emphasised the disproportionate impact of economic disparities and patriarchal social structures on the lives of women, particularly those from marginalised communities (Kumar, 1993; Sangari & Vaid, 1989; Sarkar, 1995). Hasan's narratives may be perceived as addressing these academic discussions by emphasising the experiences of characters like Nur Jahan, Malti, and Qayenaat. This facilitates a mindful and compassionate analysis of how gender interacts with other forms of social and economic marginalisation.

Methodology:

Using an intersectional perspective, this study of Anjum Hasan's collection of short stories, *The Cosmopolitans*, looks at how the author depicts gender and

intersectionality by using the theoretical frameworks of feminist theory, postcolonial studies, and critical sociology. The main methodological strategy is closely examining the chosen tales, such as *Nostalgia*, *Money*, *Art is Long*, and *Hegira*, via textual analysis. This close reading of the stories enables a sophisticated comprehension of how Hasan's work examines the interconnections of power, gender, class, and cultural identity. The study explores Anjum Hasan's narratives, focusing on feminist theory, postcolonial studies, and critical sociology. It explores how Hasan's narratives reflect gender, racism, class, and other identity indicators, and how they interact with cultural identity and marginalisation in modern India. Critical sociologists like Pierre Bourdieu analyse how material and symbolic markers influence power dynamics and social hierarchies. The methodological approach includes contextual and comparative analysis, providing a comprehensive understanding of Hasan's short stories.

Research Objectives

- To analyze how Anjum Hasan portrays power dynamics within Bangalore's art scene, focusing on female artists' experiences and their navigation of societal expectations.
- To examine how overlapping factors such as gender, class, and cultural background shape the lived experiences and agency of women in *The Cosmopolitans*.
- To evaluate the financial autonomy and systemic barriers faced by female protagonists, particularly through the character of Qayenaat and her interactions.
- To investigate the backlash against female artists like Nur Jahan in *Art is Long*, focusing on the implications for cultural identity.

Gendered Experiences and Power Dynamics in *Nostalgia*

Hasan vividly captures the essence of *Nostalgia* as he sets the base for the exploration of gender and power. One of the protagonists, Qayenaat, is an upcoming artist in the developing metropolis of Bangalore. Qayenaat's relationships with the gallery owner, Saraswathi Vishwanath, and her ex-lover Sathi, along with her encounter with an acclaimed artist, Baban Reddy, illuminate the complex power structures that shape the positions of women in the art world. The intersection of gender and recognition and success in the arts is demonstrated in Hasan's characterization of the relationship between Qayenaat and the famous Indian artist Baban Reddy. "Baban Reddy's moneyed fame ensured he was embraced as a native in the city and a much-loved figure of the art world." Qayenaat agrees with this statement (Hasan, 2013), p. 3. Male artists in the world of art are in a position that is easily accessible and far better than their female counterparts. Baban's ease in maneuvering through the art world as opposed to Qayenaat's struggle to figure out her position is a testimony to the disparity in access to resources, networks, and recognition.

Characteristics of heterosexual power relations that may infiltrate women's intimate relationships are also evident in her relationship with ex-boyfriend Sathi. The patriarchal expectation of male superiority and agency is implicit when Sathi reacts negatively to Qayenaat's involvement with art, and also his yearning to "become her" or "partner" her. It was "partly because of Qayenaat's fatigue with his [prince Umar, i.e.,] derision of cosmopolitans and partly because she wanted to share some sentiment in common with Sathi" (Hasan 10). That is the emotional and intellectual work women often do and negotiate to dismantle, the type summarised in Qayenaat's musings on their break-up.

Saraswathi Vishwanath, the gallery owner, further aggravates the gendered nature of the art world. To most of the patriarchs in the art world, and to whom the world of art and any art gallery is concerned, music is a deeply patriarchal affair. To most of them, she is a rarity. She has, however, managed to carve a small territory to call her own. At the same time, it serves to remind us of the ever-persisting 'Something' of the gendered art world to which, even the women, who, as poets and many places, do have some power, have to suffer. For example, when Qayenaat visits slasa, the Saraswathi gallery, she writes, 'the newness of the crowd in the art scene in bangalore was electric, with people head of companies, leaders of enterprise, and people who add to the glamour of the public floating around to add the glammor' (Hasan, 2013: 3). This follows the still powerful intersections and networks of the male population in most societies. The narrative, *Nostalgia* by Hasan, focuses on the male and female worlds in her time. In her narrative, Qayenaat also has a world around her which she, like the others, has to work and to survive. To claim her place, she has to fight like the others and has to swim through the heavy, uncharted waters of the world of art to. To do this, she draws from her identity as a woman of her time and culture and studies the intersections of gentry and class and public etiquette. The way the narrative examines the gendered, classed, and cultural frames women's world in a 'woman's social cage' serves as a base for the further scrutiny that Hasan does with Intersectionality in the rest of her stories.

The Intersections of Class, Gender, and Transnationalism in *Money*

Through her novel *Money*, Hasan further explores the threads of gender, class, and transnational issues that shape the lives of her protagonists. From the moment they step into the city, Qayenaat, with her roots in Uttar Pradesh and middle-class origins, identifies herself sans the last name Gupta, as a self-constructed act of relocating oneself from the perceived "normalcy" of bearing it. The Documentary Qayenaat and the Age of Chaos illustrates the havoc in identity formation and fragmented self-actualization in the country through a few contours and detours in the lives of other characters, mainly her friend Sara and the local stake-out conman, Shahrukh Bhai. As Hasan illustrates, these dilapidated class structures, which intersect with gender,

significantly reinforce the barriers women face in India, are epitomized in the figure of Qayenaat. An urban young woman in a state of totality, Qayenaat, is perpetually balancing on the brink of economic and social total collapse. These circumstances, alongside her gender, make life more precarious and less supportive, tethered to available resources. The lens of the story focuses on Qayenaat, a woman desperately striving to break free from the shackles of chronic convergence of violence, and must surrender in the face of easy repetition borne from avoidance of her late father's life insurance.

Class and gender remain intricate when looking at Qayenaat and her friend, Sara. A woman of a rich family from Kashmir, Qayenaat, can at best imagine leading a life of her 'art collector' dreams, which Sara can live because of her class. In analyzing class and cultural identity, Hasan notes Sara's 'rebellion from the carpet world' and 'marriage to a non-carpet man' (Hasan, 2013, p. 42). Another character, a local swindler called Shahrukh Bhai, adds a new layer of intersectionality to the story. Shahrukh's diverse portfolios of illegal activities, which include forging documents and insurance fraud, illustrate how Shahrukh's character, representing the class society, becomes desperate enough to break the law to escape the harsh financial realities of systemic discrimination. Shahrukh is often the subject of overly simplistic tales of crime, which stands contrary to Hasan's more complicated views in which Shahrukh is 'a good man who lived ascetically, prayed five times a day, and gave freely to charity' (Hasan, 2013, p. 49). Jens Andersson, the Swedish tourist, highlights the connections between global mobility, class, and gender, with particular emphasis on the inequalities of mobility. Khanna, the Indian art dealer, exploits and takes advantage of the racial ignorance and cultural naivety of Transnationals, and of Jens in particular, within the context of Transnationals. This serves as an example of the unequal cosmopolitan power relations at play. Hasan's treatment of this episode appears to address the extent to which women, particularly from the Global South, are far more vulnerable to exploitation in the neo-liberal globalised world than treated in the prevailing literature. Through *Money*, Hasan demonstrates how the integration of gender, class, and transnationalism within the intersecting social, economic, and cultural structures of the world enables a profound understanding of the realities of her protagonists. The intersections of these themes in the narrative reflect the need to address the complex realities of women's lives in today's India as well as the intersections of these themes.

Reclaiming Artistic Agency in *Art is Long*

The narrative *Art is Long* adds another layer to Hasan's examination of gender and intersectionality, addressing societal reaction and creative response. It focuses on the records of Nur Jahan, a woman artist who, owing to her paintings, had driven immense social and religious upheaval. The way gender and nationality interlace cultural borders in Hasan's representation of Nur Jahan attests to the impact of those

elements on the creation and appreciation of art. Hasan states that "glossy erotica" paintings by Nur Jahan have "sensibilities... offended, and riots incited" (2013, p. 21). Even the Muslim clergy and the Hindu moralists have, on record, charged her with "defiling Indian womanhood." Such a response, an outcome of the internalized religious womanhood, unveils the tenets of a suffocating dominance of the religious patriarchal structures regarding artistic expression on the female body and sexuality.

Qayenaat's responses help illustrate further the multi-leveled challenges women artists face. The conflict Qayenaat faces between wanting to unequivocally support Nur Jahan's artistic freedom and wanting her to express clearly an opinion that would relieve her pain expresses itself as "she suffers for ambiguity in a way that others do not seem to suffer for their convictions" (Hasan, 2013, p. 22). It is here that Hasan finds a space through which to read the complex formulation of gender and cultural identity in the artistry of expression with which women artists have to negotiate, often at great personal expense. The power dynamics involved in making and receiving art are brought out in the same text by rewriting it thus: "She has been accused by her critics of sensationalising art, monopolising the media, and propagating lies about the artist's role into the public's consciousness" (Hasan, 2013, p. 21). Hasan's *Art is Long* focuses on the angst of women artists in India at the crosscurrent of power, culture, and gender. The prose insists on even more fairness and inclusivity between spaces for artistry that tends to break the normal course of boundaries or preconceptions of mere confidence existing ubiquitously about the work of any artist. She firmly believes that people should be allowed to paint the world—let critics be as strident as they like, so long as the blades remain metaphorical—to urge a reevaluation undertaken by 'the art world' of its typical boundaries and assumptions in allowing diversity of artistry to speak.

Gendered Trauma and Resilience in *Hegira*

Hasan's *Hegira* examines how gender, ethnicity, and political conflict intersect, focusing especially on the experiences of marginalized women during civil unrest. The protagonist of the story is a young tribal woman named Malti. Insurgent forces kill her as payback for her husband's alleged evil deeds. Government and corporate interests' encroachment on their forest lands and natural resources forces Malti and her Koyla tribe to face the degradation of their traditional way of life in conflict-ridden areas. In addition to the ongoing armed conflict between insurgents and the state, the narrative highlights the intersection of gender and ethnicity, which further exacerbates this intersectional subjugation.

Malti's description of her husband's murder and how it affected her life is a prime example of how women are disproportionately affected by unrest and violence. Malti persisted in believing in the movement's importance even though she was unable

to clear the men who killed her husband. Hasan's story explores the range of complicated feelings that trauma can cause in women. The viewpoint of Malti sheds light on how women oppose oppressive systems. Malti remains dedicated to the cause of the insurgents in spite of the difficulties she has encountered. She recognizes the need for collective action and the unfairness of governmental policies. A kind of collective resistance and political agency that is firmly embedded in her cultural and ethnic identity is suggested by her refusal to doubt the movement's significance.

Balancing Tradition and Modernity

The Cosmopolitans explore the conflict that exists between the desire for change and the observance of established cultural norms, which often involves the dynamics of gender, class, and power. As the main characters in *Hegira*, the king, who is committed to preserving traditional dance forms, negotiates the shifting terrain of modernity and tradition. A national-level annual festival, state-of-the-art auditorium, museum library, five-star hotel, and university to teach performance arts are among the King's efforts to institutionalize and revitalize the dance (Hasan 2013, p. 153). *The Cosmopolitans* is a story that explores the complex interrelationship between tradition and modernity. Notwithstanding the seeming advancements, the King's representation emphasizes how persistent traditional power structures and gender hierarchies are. The King's desire to keep traditions like the cart ritual alive is an example of how patriarchal and class-based structures can be maintained under the guise of cultural preservation. An example of the conflict between accepting the past and working toward a more just future is Qayenaat, a woman who is drawn to Simhal's cultural diversity but worries about its oppressive customs. She demonstrates the difficulties of balancing tradition and advancement through her understanding of the King's viewpoint and her continuous battles with ethical issues. Specifically focusing on the visual arts, the story *Nostalgia* examines the nexus between tradition and modernity. The potential conflicts between traditional cultural and religious norms and the desire for artistic experimentation and expression are highlighted by Hasan's depiction of the controversy surrounding artist Nur Jahan's explicit paintings. The criticism directed towards Nur Jahan's work highlights the permanent impact of religious and patriarchal systems on acceptable artistic creation. Readers are prompted to consider the difficulties faced by individuals navigating this shifting environment, as well as how gender, class, and cultural identity impact the negotiations between the past and present.

Conclusion

Anjum Hasan's collection of short stories, *The Cosmopolitans*, examines the intricate relationships that exist in contemporary India between race, social class, cultural identity, and power. The stories highlight the necessity of using an

intersectional perspective in order to understand the viewpoints of those who are marginalized, particularly women. Hasan's work aligns with feminist theorists and postcolonial scholars who emphasize the importance of examining how various identity markers interact to shape the experiences of oppression and resistance for both individuals and groups. With an emphasis on the acceptance and achievement of one's gender, Hasan examines the power dynamics in Bangalore's art scene. She looks into the institutional obstacles women face in achieving financial stability and self-determination, including Qayenaat. In *Art is Long* she explores the artist Nur Jahan's discourse on the connection between gender and cultural identity. In the context of political violence and instability, Hasan's analysis of gender and intersectionality in *Hegira* transitions to political conflict and civil unrest, highlighting how gender, race, and class interact to shape the daily lives of marginalized women. The prevailing narratives that frequently ignore or oversimplify the complexities of identity, power, and social transformation in India are persuasively countered by Hasan's books. Inspired by the writings of writers such as Arundhati Roy, Anita Desai, and Githa Hariharan, they engage with the rich literary traditions of Indian literature that examine issues of gender, class, and cultural identity. For politicians, social activists, and academics committed to tackling the structural injustices and marginalization that women in India experience, Hasan's work is extremely significant. Readers are compelled to address the enduring gender biases and structural obstacles that consistently impact women's lives by the compelling stories in *The Cosmopolitans*.

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