



Zeenuh Futehally's Zohra; Reimagination Of Indian English Women's Writing

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Abstract: This essay rereads Zeenuh Futehally's *Zohra* (1951), an early Indian English novel by a Muslim writer, to restore its position as a postcolonial and feminist novel rendered peripheral in Indian English literary history. Written in semi-autobiographical mode, it shows the everyday lives of upper-class Muslim women torn between patriarchal repression and academic ambition. In the literary stage, *Zohra's* absence is based on systemized gender-, region-, and religion-based biases. By employing postcolonial feminist theory and canon controversy, in the opinion of this research, *Zohra* should take her rightful place within scholarly discourse. Through close reading of the novel, historical contextualization, and reception study, this essay attempts to reclaim *Zohra* as a worthy contribution to feminist and postcolonial fiction, thus arguing for a more universal Indian English canon.

Index words: Zeenuh Futehally, *Zohra*, Indian English literature, postcolonial feminism, canon formation, Muslim women writers, Hyderabad, marginalized voices.

I. INTRODUCTION

In the world of Indian English literature, women's writing—especially Muslim women from outside large cities—is still not adequately recognized. Zeenuh Futehally's *Zohra* (1951), one of the first novels written in English by a Muslim woman in India, has otherwise been relegated to the periphery of hegemonic literary discourse. This essay seeks to reclaim *Zohra* as more than a pioneering feminist work of fiction but also as a rich and nuanced novel that engages with the processes of colonial modernity, regional identity, and gendered marginality. It seeks to disrupt conventional boundaries that have framed literary canon and to make an argument for a broader reassessment of Indian English literary canonicity.

II. Historical and Cultural Context: Hyderabad and Colonial Modernity

Zohra is a novel set in colonial Hyderabad—a princely state that operated with relative autonomy under British rule. The syncretic culture of the city, the elite Muslim community, and reformist education movements are the settings within which *Zohra* lives and struggles. Eric Beverley's conceptualization of Hyderabad, British India, and the World (2015) captures the region's complex modernity, which made the selective incorporation of colonial ideology possible, particularly in education and gender roles

There, Zohra's educational journey, self-assertive ambitions, and patriarchal taboos represent more universal conflicts between native patriarchy and colonial modernity. Futehally conveys the ambivalence of this negotiation, pointing to how colonial ideologies empowered yet bounded Muslim women's agency.

III. Feminist Voice and Narrative Resistance

Her heroine, Zohra, is an early representation of feminist feelings in the rigid Islamic and Indian tradition. Her thirst for learning, search for knowledge, and inability to appreciate marriage are all signs of a subdued but powerful feminist drive.

From the postcolonial feminist perspective, especially that of Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Zohra's rebellion can be seen not in Western explanations of self-styled rebellion but in day-to-day negotiations of her sociocultural settings. Her rebellion is the quest for education, emotional independence, and inner self-respect.

With Zohra, Futehally constructs an inner reality that interprets the complexities of being a woman and a Muslim in colonial India. In this, the stereotype of the veiled passive Muslim woman is dismantled, and the low-key forms of agency operate despite seclusion and silence placed at the center

IV. Postcolonial Identity and Linguistic Hybridity

Futehally's adoption of the English language as the medium of composition was strategic and subversive. The language of the colonizer is made into an instrument by which the author states the grievance of a hitherto silenced people. Homi Bhabha's theory of hybridity is invoked here: Futehally does not completely appropriate Western codes nor does she, unselfconsciously, imitate Islamic conservatism. Instead, she creates a third space—a hybrid voice addressed to both Indian and Western audiences.

It is the hybridity of the language that creates a tension between global readability and cultural authenticity. Futehally takes up English not to imitate the colonizer but to redefine her world for a reading public. Her narrative restraint and stylistic delicacy are a self-conscious conflation of Western form and Eastern content.

V. Canon Formation and Marginalization

Zohra's exclusion from the Indian English canon can be attributed to various intersecting factors: publication year (1951), Muslim woman authorship, and cultural contextualization. John Guillory's cultural capital theory of canonicity is most applicable. Literary distinction is equally the result of textual worth as social and institutional settings, which authenticate some voices over others.

In contrast to Attia Hosain's *Sunlight on a Broken Column* or to novels by Mulk Raj Anand, however, Zohra was not supported by success or by institutional attention. Meenakshi Mukherjee's *The Twice Born Fiction* (1971), one of the first Indian English literary criticism attempts, has very little space for Futehally's work. Likewise, even though *Women Writing in India*, edited by Susie Tharu and K. Lalita (1991), mentions Zohra briefly, it does not favor it as the core literary work.

Zohra's marginality is therefore symptomatic of larger erasures: of the voices of Muslim women, of regional histories, and of early feminist articulations that do not fit metropolitan or mainstream paradigms.

VI. Reception Study and Afterlife of Zohra

The reception of Zohra has been thin and scattered. There are hardly any reviews of the novel from the modern era, and scholarly interest is nil. Ahmed Tajjudin's doctoral thesis *Rediscovering Early Indian Muslim Women Novelists Writing in English: A Study of Iqbalunnisa Hussain and Zeenuth Futehally*, in

2014 at Vidyasagar University, is one of the efforts to place Zohra in education and empowerment literature. Yet, the novel lies unattended without steady critical scrutiny.

A study of early citations and recent digital reactions (e.g., Goodreads, blogs, academic databases) across feminist readers and scholars of Muslim women's literature demonstrates a pattern of rediscovery. This rediscovery is minor, however, with little institutional infrastructure to make Zohra a canonical text.

Stanley Fish's theory of interpretive communities provides a useful framework here: the readers' backgrounds and ideological frameworks heavily determine the meanings that a text is read to have. With growing feminist and postcolonial readerships, Zohra's latent meaning might become more fully articulated.

The recent increase in attention to reclaiming South Asian Muslim women's histories has created rich terrain for reconsidering texts such as Zohra. Sites such as the South Asian Digital Archive (SADAA) and scholarly journals committed to postcolonial feminism have begun to recognize silences that remain in canonical accounts. Therefore, Zohra can be reactivated as a bridge text that previews later literary and social evolutions.

VII. Comparative Canonical Debates and Muslim Women's Writing

When placed against more established works such as Hosain's *Sunlight on a Broken Column* or Lalithambika Antharjanam's *Agnisakshi*, Zohra's understated radicalism comes to light. While Hosain's novel is more explicitly involved in nationalist politics and *Agnisakshi* in religious feminism, Zohra presents us with a model of intellectual and emotional agency that owes allegiance to realism and muted uprising. This recommends an interdisciplinary study to retrieve not only histories but also Muslim women's literary imaginaries.

Besides, the coincidence of gender, religion, and language in Zohra also presents recent discussions regarding literary pluralism. The recovery of such books is important in dismantling the homogenized construction of Indian womanhood and allowing a broader literary history.

The absence of prolonged comparison with other linguistic or regional narratives additionally highlights Zohra's exceptional positioning. Compared to Bengali or Malayalam feminist writing, Futehally's novel presents a uniquely Hyderabadi cultural sensibility, which consolidates our knowledge of regional diversity in early Indian women's writing.

VIII. Conclusion: Towards a New Canon

Zeenuth Futehally's Zohra needs a new critical reappraisal for its pioneering investigation into feminist consciousness, postcolonial identity, and regional particularity. The novel is an example of counter reading of Indian Womanhood and Muslim identity in colonial India. Its omission is symptomatic of systemic closures to canon formation through linguistic, regional, and gendered omissions.

Reclaiming Zohra is not a matter of literary archaeology alone—it's an issue of epistemic justice. As Indian English literary studies widen and broaden, books like Zohra need to be reclaimed to their proper position in scholarly argument, not only to fill the historical record but to provide new avenues of feminist and postcolonial thinking.

The bearing of such a renaissance is mind-boggling. A more multicultural literary canon unsettles dominant hierarchies, legitimizes the voice of the historically marginalized, and restores our shared cultural memory. Futehally's writing, rooted in its specificity but universal in its appeal, needs to be read, taught, and remembered.

IX. References

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