

## 11. Book review



Vinita Dhondiyal Bhatnagar, 2024, *Zaira*, LOCKSLEY HALL PUBLISHING LLP, Price-399/-

### Exploring the Spatio-Temporal Elements in *Zaira* by Vinita Dhondiyal Bhatnagar

#### Abstract

**Zaira** appeared on the Indian literary firmament in 2024 and was well received by readers and by critics. The Pioneer declared it as a gripping tale of ambition, thrills and self discovery. The novel's title, **Zaira**, means "a shining flower," and it tells the poignant story of a college girl grappling with the guilt of her idol's untimely death. Themes of hope, resilience, and courage are woven into the narrative, offering readers a message of inspiration and strength. "**Zaira**" is a contemporary novel that explores the journey of its protagonist, Zaira, and her struggles with identity, love, and societal expectations.

While much attention has been paid to plot and characterization in the novel, one overlooked aspect of the story is its firm location in Bhopal. The story begins from the Raja Bhoj airport and an early climactic moment occurs on the flyover near the airport. It moves over VIP Road, Jahangirabad, Jahanuma Palace, MP Nagar and the outskirts of Bhopal. The city serves as an external setting for the novel but is also an internal landscape. The contrast between the old, traditional, historic parts of Bhopal and its modern, bustling character are well delineated and reflect the conflict and the opposing forces within Zaira.

This paper analyzes the settings, the manipulation of time, and the characters' interactions within the parameters of space and time to record the nuanced ways in which these elements shape the narrative.

## INTRODUCTION

Vinita Dhondiyal Bhatnagar likes to call **Zaira** her love letter to Bhopal.

Zaira belongs firmly to Bhopal. Her family and extended family live on the same streets and she has cousins and uncles in her neighborhood. The cozy, enclosed space of her home is marked by the love and devotion of her parents and by her bond with her brother. She has never left Bhopal, never left the sheltered comfort of living on a street where six of her cousins lived.

This begins to change even before Layla enters the story. An uncle shifts to Dubai with his family, a cousin moves to Delhi and her brother Sikander finds friends and a life of his own. Zaira herself now studies in an Anglicized college and befriends Jai.

The two are a study in contrasts. Zaira's ancestors hailed from a cold, mountainous region in the North but over generations had settled their roots deep into the Bhopal. Some of her family members migrated to Pakistan after partition. Jai's family are Sindhi immigrants from Pakistan who shifted after partition. The experience of living in refugee camps is written into their DNA. Zaira's grandmother talks nostalgically of the grand regal past of Bhopal. Jai's family seldom talks about the past, about the country and the lands that they have left behind. Even Rajyawardhan's family came from Peshawar. History is inscribed into their destinies and its not pretty.

Zaira enjoys the history of the city she lives in. She revels in recreating what was once the grand experience of being in Bhopal's own Taj Mahal and can almost imagine the musical fountain playing and the sound of horse carriages being driven up to the palace. Silver trays, golden beakers, marble table tops and gilded mirrors are conjured up only for the mirage to be broken by the ghost of Layla. Layla dies in the opening act but her presence lingers through all the scenes and all the actions of the novel. Layla was a film star. She seemed to be

free of all the shackles of society. Yet as the plot of the story unravels we realize that this freedom was only illusory.

The novel contrasts different types of space, which can be seen as reflecting the tension between Zaira's inner world and the social world around her. For instance, Zaira's movement from smaller, more intimate, and traditional spaces (her home, her community) to larger, cosmopolitan spaces (the city, the hotel, the film sets) represents her shift in identity, as well as her struggle to reconcile personal desires with societal responsibilities. Mumbai is seen as a more complex and alienating space than Bhopal and Zaira's sense of unease increases on her visit to the city.

Zaira's physical movement through spaces such as the college, the hotel, the hospital, the flat, the film sets, Bairagarh. Rajyawardhan's home and finally the ashram represent her growing sense of autonomy and efficacy while also acknowledging her anxiety and uncertainty.

Spaces embody different phases of her life—each space posing its own set of challenges and offering different kinds of freedom or restriction. Thus the “safe house” that she is restricted to for a period of her life is also the place where she begins to learn physical self-defense. Zaira's journey through different stages of life—from girlhood to womanhood, from family to independence—can be seen as a temporal chronotope. Time represents the unfolding of personal challenges, the maturation of the protagonist, and her evolving understanding of self. Time is not just a passing factor; it is a powerful force that compels Zaira to confront societal and personal questions about love, ambition, friendship and freedom. As Zaira moves through different spaces (from her family home to the city, from the personal to the social), she experiences the passage of time in a way that reshapes her identity. These changes in space mark her personal transformation

Bhatnagar manipulates time and space in *Zaira* to highlight the fluidity of past, present, and future. The novel's temporal elements move beyond a linear progression to create a layered structure that reflects the complexities of identity formation, historical memory, and social change. The novel employs a non-linear narrative structure, where the narrative oscillates between the past and the present. This temporal disjunction is reflective of the fragmented nature of memory and the way events are experienced subjectively. Memory plays a critical role in the temporal structure of the novel. The past is not a static element but is revisited and

reinterpreted as Zaira grows and gains new experiences. The ghost of Layla haunts the novel and influences Zaira's transformation and growth. The fluidity of time in the novel allows Bhatnagar to explore the complexities of selfhood, where the past is never fully left behind but constantly revisited in the present.

### Conclusion

The interplay between space and time in *Zaira* is integral to the novel's exploration of personal identity and societal transformation. The character's movement through different spaces, both physical and emotional, is intricately connected to her perception of time. The conflict between the past (rooted in tradition) and the present (shaped by modernization and urbanization) serves as the driving force of the narrative.

**Zaira** marks the coming of age of the second tier city novel. By locating its action in Bhopal, it eschews the literary elitism that sees only cosmopolitan cities as fit location for stories. In the days to come we can expect to read many more tales from the real India.

### References

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