

The word "Abstract" is centered within a large, blue, arrow-shaped graphic pointing to the right. The graphic has a textured, brush-stroke-like appearance. There are also smaller, lighter blue arrow shapes above and below the main graphic.

## Abstract

A worldview is how you look at the world, how you think it operates, why things happen the way they do, what your purpose is. Worldview is a general orientation about the world. It is a basic set of beliefs that guide action. This article explores the world view of Tahera, the central character in Shama Futehally's novel, Tara Lane. Born into an aristocratic Muslim family in Bombay, Tahera is conditioned to limited thinking space. Home is a protective haven that hems her in and her life has limited opportunity to explore and develop in an autonomous way. There is always a perplexing sense of frustration and complexity within her. As a child she had 'metaphysical questions' in her mind about poverty in the world and inequality in society. Childhood conditioning develops fear and servility in her. Her education also has not played any role in liberating her. She enters marriage, the only destiny of her life, ill prepared and ignorant. She was perpetually explaining things to her husband, 'in her mind'. Futehally, one of the few Muslim women writing in English in India, chooses Tahera as a mouth piece to show how curtailing women and protecting them through ignorance, hampers their world view. They are unable to see the world in unity and it makes them uncomfortable to struggle with a constant sense of incoherence. According to Social Constructivism, meaning is constructed by human beings as they engage with the world they are interpreting. They make sense of it based on social perspective. Tahera, is capable of deep emotion, and observation as seen in her description of the people and places that she encounters however she is not better equipped to deal with cruelties and harsh oddities of life.

A view that is always perturbing and questioning, without having proper strategies to deal with it, causes a person to experience the world only partially and women for a long time, have suffered this lack of knowledge, in agony. The article suggests that human mind, whether it belongs to a man or a woman, has infinite possibilities and a unified vision of both genders would make a better place.

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*Keywords: gender, Muslim, worldview*

## Exploring the worldview of the Muslim female protagonist in

### Shama Futehally's *Tara Lane*

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Alison Gray, in the article, *Worldviews*, defines Worldview as a collection of attitudes, values, stories and expectations about the world around us, which inform our every thought and action. Worldview is the way we view the world, conditioned by our gender, environment, religion and culture. It is also very much influenced by the principles followed by our families and the way we have been taught overtly or subvertly about ourselves and the world around us.

This article focusses on the female protagonist, Tahera, from *Tara Lane*, the first novel of Indian writer Shama Futehally. Futehally (1952-2004) was a novelist, short story writer and translator and features among the Indian women writers of the 90s in English. Born into an aristocratic Muslim family in Bombay, her personality was shaped by the blend of western education, Islamic culture and secular values. Both her novels *Tara Lane* (1993) and *Reaching Bombay Central* (2002) have a Muslim woman protagonist. A vignette of what she herself described as 'privileged sheltered life' appears in both the novels. I have chosen this novel because there are few Muslim women writing in English, a few names to note are Rokeya Hussain Zeenath Futehally, Iqballunissa Hussain, Attia Hosain, Samina Ali among few others and hence a perspective into the worldview of the women in this community may help break to bring about better understanding. This article tries to delineate Tahera's constant struggle in finding a coherent explanation of things within the boundaries of her life especially when it comes in conflict with her aristocratic, protected life that is in stark contrast to the life of many around *Tara Lane*. The article will attempt an interpretation of the world of a Muslim woman from an elite and cultured household, as depicted in the novel. It will also direct us to reasons for Tahera's incompetence and disempowerment.

Creswell, in *Three Components Involved in Design*, explains four types of worldview: **Postpositivism, Constructivism, Pragmatism and Participatory worldview.**

Postpositivism represents thinking after positivism challenging traditional notions of the absolute truth of knowledge and recognizing that we cannot be "positive" about our claims of knowledge when studying the behavior and actions of humans. The postpositivist tradition comes from 19th-century writers, such as Comte, Mill, Durkheim, Newton, and Locke and it has been most recently articulated by writers such as Phillips and Burbules. The knowledge that develops through a postpositivist lens is based on careful observation and measurement of the objective reality that exists "out there" in the world.

Social constructivists hold assumptions that individuals seek understanding of the world in which they live and work. Individuals develop subjective meanings of their experiences—meanings directed toward certain objects or things. The basic generation of meaning is always social, arising in and out of interaction with a human community. The ideas came from Mannheim and from works such as Berger and Luekmann's (1967) *The Social Construction of Reality* and Lincoln and Guba's (1985) *Naturalistic Inquiry*. More recent writers who have summarized this position are Lincoln and Guba (2000), Schwandt (2007), Neuman (2000), and Crotty (1998), among others.

An advocacy/participatory worldview holds that meaning is intertwined with politics and a political agenda. This philosophical worldview focuses on the needs of groups and individuals in our society that may be marginalized or disenfranchised and so focus on important social issues of the day, issues such as empowerment, inequality, oppression, domination, suppression, and alienation. The advocacy/participatory (or emancipatory) writers have drawn on the works of Marx, Adorno, Marcuse, Habermas, and Freire (Neuman, 2000). Fay (1987), Heron and Reason (1997), and Kemmis and Wilkinson (1998).

Pragmatism as a worldview arises out of actions, situations, and consequences rather than antecedent conditions (as in postpositivism). There is a concern with applications—what works—and solutions to problems. Pragmatists do not see the world as an absolute unity. Truth is what works at the time. It is not based in a duality between reality independent of the mind or within the mind.

We can apply a social constructivist worldview to this work of art, as it can be seen that Tahera is who she is, because of the social forces that have shaped her and the limited number of people, she has interacted with. Because of the cocooned atmosphere at home, her worldview is limited, her exposure to the realities of life is peripheral, which incapacitates her whenever she has a brush with the outside world; whether it be travelling by the crowded train, interacting with poor people, responding to the problems at her father's factory or dealing with corrupt officials. As a girl child, her charitable dreams of doing something good for the society are 'lovingly' stifled as inappropriate and hence when she goes to college, she herself declines from the alluring prospect of joining the NSS.

Tahera's childhood is the ground from which the edifice of her life is created. Her exposure to the lower strata of society is through her Ayah and Samuel, who were the life blood of the three children. She is aware that Ayah and Samuel are poor and when she is offered some sweet gram from Mount Mary, the fair for poor people, she is afraid she is eating away the poor people's food. The dichotomy

between the rich and the poor is so bothersome to her that amidst luxurious clothes and delicious food, she wonders aloud to her newly wed husband Rizwan, “I feel that deep down, things can’t be totally real.....for instance our lovely house and garden.....when they are surrounded by such slums and such squalor” (81).

This is the first area where she seeks to find a reconciliation, expressed in the opening description of Tara Lane, ‘our lane’ which was dusty, arid, jaded and which was crowded, squalid, with narrow gutters , of which they ‘began to feel secretly ashamed of’ but which is contrasted to her home at the end of the lane; their house with ‘French windows’ ‘water-lilies in the pond’ and a place from where ‘the sky itself looked more beautiful from my mother’s house and garden’ (10). This feeling of unfairness in society due to social and financial inequality is something she could not come to terms with. Tahera felt,

Deep down I had known that our world was an erratic one; in this world things do not happen as they should. It is a world of chance blows in the dark- to fend them off you had to duck and slip and slither. It did not do to stand upright and walk firm, because then you only knocked down the house of cards in which you lived. (120)

In her childhood, she was fascinated by the train but once when she and her sister Munni had a firsthand experience of the train journey; of being flung inside, fists pounding her, her sister shrieking in fright, it was then that she realized that however fascinating it seemed from the outside, ‘inside it was a smelly nightmare of arms and legs’. Tahera’s observant and sensitive spirit internalized everything and it was difficult for her to try to create meaning in life.

writer has different ways of explicating the worldview and here Futehally chooses to describe Tahera’s attitudes through three images; a tiny dark worm in the mind, metaphor of life as a fragile piece of cloth and a diseased state of suffering from acute cold. These three recurrent images are used throughout the novel to describe her abstract feelings of restlessness with the world. The first image is that of a ‘tiny dark worm’ that refer to a troubled question, confusion or metaphysical doubt that crept into Tahera’s (also called Tara) mind on various occasions. As a child, her response to it was ‘best to ask and be done with’ as when she wanted to take her father’s permission to collect donation from the neighbourhood, inspired by the speech of Pandit Nehru, for the people suffering from the drought in Bombay. Social constructivist worldview is constructed through interactions with others; here an awkward dinner scene at home where Tahera asks her father for this permission. She had to squeeze out

the words, her brother gave out a short bitter laugh as it was unimaginable that she would want to 'wander from house to house' and her mother was 'completely still....as she always was in impossible situations.' Her father initially tried to cajole her out of her zealous idea by saying that he would send a cheque but when she persisted that she wanted to actually collect the money, she was sent in a car along with a driver and it was not at all fruitful as she had expected.

As Tahera grew older she learnt to silence herself because she always got a loving rebuff for her actions as if she did not have to bother herself with things in the man's world. However the worm would always remain squirming in her mind. She despaired of it, 'whatever you did it was there...and then I had to do something drastic to make it go'. At various instances in the novel, she questions, tries to work out some solution, tries to do her part, tries to speak up but each time she is met with a patriarchal wall of control. Futehally has aptly painted the life of a Muslim woman in the aristocratic society who need not do anything but take care of the home and the household.

The second recurrent image is the comparison of life to a 'piece of cloth'. It reveals her view of life, marking her vulnerability and fragility. She says, 'life, I knew, was like a piece of cloth which was stretched too thin, so that you could discover a large hole underneath you.'(12) Tara perceived an unconscious fear regarding life. The novel uses synonyms of the word 'fear', 'afraid', 'frightened' many times. Rizwan also asked her, "Why do you always look so frightened?...when all you have to do is sit at home smelling beautiful." She could not explain to him that she was always troubled by a gnawing agony and anxiety about a society gone wrong. The poverty-stricken dirty neighborhood, the crowded and polluted streets of Bombay always made her feel that the world was an erratic place.

Tahera is Futehally's mouthpiece, her words emerge out of the writer's deep concern for the individual life, threatened by corruption, moral squalor, religious intolerance and social inequalities. Gita Hariharan, in the Introduction to Futehally's collection of short stories, *Frontiers*, states, that she is concerned with 'how breakdowns in the system...filter down to individual level....now as cause, now as effect.' (ix)

Tara's personal fear stemmed from her lack of exposure and inability to deal with the outside world. All the women in the household lived a sheltered life and were ignorant of the ways of the world. They perceived any task outside the home to be mammoth, frightening and confusing. Even going to the bania's store, when the servant was not available, was an impossible task for them as they were unaware which oil or rice to buy. It reached a mammoth level on her visit to the Municipal

Corporation;

Always, in that building, I felt a hopelessness which did not end even if my object was achieved. It's maze-like corridors, its smell of urine, its shabby wooden benches, its enormous dusty rooms filled with identical clerks, and the collective front put up by all these things against putting a stamp where it needed to be put-to be caught up in these things was to be reminded that the world was unreal and only nightmare existed.

After my last visit to the Moonisipality I had gone home and lain on my bed and wept.

After that only the men went. (148)

Tahera's values were formed by her father, Mustaq saab, who was an honest businessman. Their family-owned factory was ran on honest principles. But the government offices were full of corrupt people and the bank would not sanction loans without bribes. Opposition arose in the family against his idealism from his own younger brother Imran and later, from his son Zain and Tara's husband Rizwan. When the two brothers parted ways...Tara felt 'like cloth ripping open and my childhood seemed to tear with it.' (49) After Tara's marriage the situation in the factory had worsened, the salaries were delayed and the workers had gone on strike. Rizwan took the things in his hands and silently bribed the union leader with company funds. When the family came to know of it, they were crestfallen. A chasm developed between Rizwan and Tara. She had a little worm in her mind that had to be removed and so when he came home in the evening, she asked him about it. And in a voice like an iron bar, he had replied, 'you can either have a business, or you can have beautiful ideas.

You should all learn that, starting with your father.' (86) She had been taught her place again, as she recollected the words of her mother, the day before the wedding, 'You will have to give in, and give in and give in.' (86) Social constructivism is based on the idea that people construct their own understanding and knowledge of the world through their experiences and working according to here. Here we see that there are two paths: an idealistic and realistic one. Both are at tangents with each other. Tahera watches this struggle in her family, which is infact a reflection of the moral conflict in the society outside. She is pained by it and sees how it breaks the sacred thread of her family and its values, but is incapacitated to speak or fight.

And hence comes the discussion of the third image; a diseased state of suffering from acute cold, a psychosomatic condition of suffocation and breathlessness. She states, "growing up resembled nothing

so much as steadily acquiring a cold in the head. I would stuff up and stuff up.....I was protected as if by ear-muffs, and I learnt to nod or smile or talk through the metaphorical slits in the muffling.”(49-50) This is clearly an indication of the smothering and mentally claustrophobic life situations. The condition begins in her childhood, growing more and more critical as she grew up.

Futehally paints the picture of Tahera as a college student, promising and studious, but thwarted from growing to her full potential. She would never be allowed to join the NSS student volunteers, who led by Father de Costa of the Social Service Wing visited villages with aid, breathed the fresh air, slept under millions of beautiful stars, ate the dal from enormous pots spiced with divine fresh coriander and distributed truckloads of food. She had to pacify her mind by visualizing that those places would have unhygienic conditions and making excuses in her mind while in reality, she felt deeply depressed and isolated from this admirable person and the chance it could have given her to do something about the wrong in the world and in her misery she ‘muffled up more and more’.

Life had not given her an opportunity to explore and develop in an autonomous manner. The line between what was permissible and what was not was very thin, giving rise to a frustrating sense of confusion and perplexity. But the desire for freedom was insatiable, and the only place where she felt free to such a level was walking near the seashore at their farmhouse Munra which they visited during vacations,

You could gaze at the sky, taking in more and more till you were filled up and light;  
you could watch the waves roll in without end, one after the other ...you could walk on  
and on and on; you could never go too far. Here, you were meant to go far, and allowed to  
go on. It was very different from being at home, where you were constantly reminded that  
you must halt somewhere.(43)

Another tenant of social constructivist worldview is that when one encounters something new, one needs to reconcile it with one’s own previous ideas or change what one believes in or discard new information as irrelevant. In a Muslim household, arranged marriages were the norm taking place in a pre-set manner, mostly into a family known to them, without any traces of a valid personal opinion from the daughters. When Tahera’s marriage to Rizwan is fixed, one cannot fail to notice Munni’s statement, ‘I always thought you wanted to marry a poet’. Tahera saw that everyone was happy with the choice of Rizwan as her husband, and she saw no reason to refuse such a good match, especially

when it is suggested that he could be a 'help' to the family business. For a moment in the novel, he is like a Knight in shining armour, the cause of everyone's happiness.

Tara's feelings on her marriage are an indication of the 'subtle critique of gendered power inequalities', states Elizabeth Jackson. Again her 'initially enthusiastic willingness to be servile is partly an expression of her genuine and understandable happiness as the bride of a "good match"...but it is arguably, a reaction of her disempowerment through marriage. Tara defines her feeling on the next day of marriage in these words,

This then is drowning. Like a wave which swells so slowly, which fills so evenly, that it almost falls back before coming to a crest, so my whole being rose to a moment which I did not know existed. It pierces me; then it dropped me to spin furiously downwards like a leaf in a whirlpool. (80)

The words 'drowning', 'wave', 'falls back', 'dropped', 'whirlpool' are all suggestive of her intense feeling of submergence, and an image used by Futehally to express the state of identity loss experienced in marriage. On one occasion, when Tara timidly brings up the working style of Rizwan at the factory as he harshly deals with the workers, he reacted in rage and she learns that she has to submit and pacify her husband by 'no longer asking questions'. She is never involved in the various workings of the business. Even her father never involved the women. At a point in the volatile situation, her mother breaks down when he suggests that they may have to shift to a smaller flat, forgo luxuries and give away her jewels as wedding gift to Imran's daughter as they would not be able to buy expensive gifts. She was ill-prepared to meet this and asked, "why don't you include us more?" But her father was reluctant and stated that he felt they needed to be shielded from all this dishonest and corrupt lot. The women are excluded from all this knowledge and eventually Rizwan criticized Tara by saying, "Don't be utterly ridiculous...have you learnt nothing about the world at all". It is no wonder that in chagrin she collectively answers for her whole lot, "No, we haven't." (150). Marriage was a ground that made her realize her lack of voice. In order to maintain peace in the family, she gives in to her husband's sense of superiority and control.

Elizabeth Jackson comments, 'the bride in *Tara Lane* is initially pleased with her arranged marriage and delighted with her bridegroom, but becomes progressively disillusioned, not only with Rizwan himself, but also with her lack of power within the marriage and within her circumscribed world.' J

Kuortti opines, “she sees everything, in the factory, and everywhere, but she has no say.”

As Jackson says, *Tara Lane* is a narrative of exclusion of power within the family and within the economy. Thus we can see that the cultural attitudes and practices have made the women fragile and vulnerable. They haven't taught her to deal with the harsh realities of life, considering in a compassionate manner the job of a father to protect the women in the family while that of a husband to have the right to decide how much they should be included. It is no wonder they lack confidence to face the world on their own.

The article thus brings out the incoherent worldview of the central character. She is unable to strike a balance between her life and the life outside her sphere, between idealism and reality, between beauty and the ugliness of poverty, between the desire to know and the cost to be paid for it, between the desire to do something for changing the world and the constant reminder of her boundaries, between being a peacemaker or a rule breaker. According to Gray, ‘a worldview is how a culture works out in individual practice’. A work of fiction presents the worldview of the author. In assessing the character of Tahera from a social constructivist worldview, we realize that Tahera as an individual has an active worldview that internally questions, revolts and is distressed at life. But it is her gendered conditioning that incapacitates her. Shama Futehally as an author, suggests that a Muslim woman with a sensitive spirit, is aware of the follies in society and has a deep desire for a more coherent, peaceful and balanced world and presents this eternal clash of idealism and reality.

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