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RESEARCH PAPER

Purdah, Pavement and Public Space: Mobility, Thresholds and Gendered Urban Geography in Dhaka Fiction in English

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ABSTRACT

This article examines how three Dhaka-set Anglophone novels (2007–2011) represent purdah's spatial role in women's urban mobility, not its religious doctrine. Bangladeshi Anglophone criticism has emphasised nation, memory and diaspora. Purdah as a spatial practice remains underexamined. This qualitative study integrates feminist geocriticism with spatial narratology. The purposive corpus, selected for Dhaka setting and mobility themes, comprises Anam's *A Golden Age* and *The Good Muslim* and Omar's *Like a Diamond in the Sky*. Passages on movement and thresholds were close-read and thematically coded. These were read contrapuntally against planning documents and harassment research. Introducing "negotiated purdah", the study finds purdah represented relationally, not as fixed seclusion. Three modalities emerge: the sheltering house, the rooftop and professional licence, and masculine street drift. Women's mobility expands through protection and purpose; permission often rests with male kin. Future research should include working-class women. Planners should address gendered mobility.

KEYWORDS Purdah, Feminist Geocriticism, Spatial Narratology, Dhaka, Bangladeshi Literature in English, Gendered Mobility, Tahmima Anam, Urban Geography

Introduction

In March 2018, a study by the development organisation BRAC reported that 94 per cent of the women it surveyed who commuted by public transport in Bangladesh had experienced sexual harassment, and that most responded by staying silent or moving away rather than confronting the harasser (BRAC, 2018; The Daily Star, 2018). Four years later, when Dhaka opened its first metro line in December 2022, one of the six coaches on each train was reserved for women (The Financial Express, 2022a). These two moments frame a long-standing problem in the city. Women's presence in public space is at once expanding, through education, wage work and new transport infrastructure, and conditioned by norms of modesty, protection and permission that are often summarised in South Asia by the word *purdah*. Literally "curtain," purdah names a system of female seclusion and modesty that limits interaction between women and unrelated men (Papanek, 1973). In Bangladesh it has been shown to shape women's work, movement and use of public space in both rural and urban settings (Amin, 1997; Feldman & McCarthy, 1983; Lata et al., 2021).

A note on terms is necessary at the outset, because purdah carries religious as well as social meaning. In contemporary Bangladesh, many Muslim women and girls observe purdah through modest dress, such as the hijab, niqab or burqa, while studying in universities, working in offices and shopping in markets. For many, this is a sincere

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religious commitment and a matter of personal choice, and research on Bangladesh shows that veiling is often compatible with, and can even facilitate, women's education, employment and public mobility (Huq, 2008; Rahman, 2025; Rozario, 2006). This article does not evaluate purdah as a religious obligation, nor does it treat modest dress as a sign of oppression. Its object is narrower: the ways in which three novels represent the *spatial* regulation of women's movement, of which seclusion in the home is one historical form. Where the novels' own focalisers take a critical or secular view of religious practice, the analysis identifies that view as the text's perspective rather than adopting it as the article's own.

Fiction has long been one of the places where such negotiations are imagined and judged. Bangladeshi literature in English, which Quayum and Hasan (2022) describe as a "thrice born" tradition shaped by colonial Bengal, East Pakistan and independent Bangladesh, has grown markedly since the 1990s. Its first feminist book is itself a spatial fantasy: Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's Sultana's Dream (1905) envisions a Ladyland in which the streets are run by women and men are secluded (Hossain, 1988). But scholarship on this tradition has not followed Rokeya's lead. Its focus has been on war memory, national belonging and diaspora (Chakraborty &Shabnam, 2025; Harputlu Shah, 2018; Ho, 2023). Although much of this fiction is set in Dhaka, the city is often portrayed as a setting, not as geography that the texts actively produce as gendered.

This article tackles that shortcoming. It asks how Dhaka-set Anglophone novels depict the movement of women in the city and the role of purdah in these depictions. Its central claim is that the novels represent purdah not as a wall, but as a series of thresholds which can be negotiated. Domestic architecture, family permission, religious authority and the fear of the street limit women's access to space. That access is also renegotiated professionally, in times of crisis, in vertical spaces such as rooftops, and when the protected interior is put to new uses. I term this negotiated purdah: a spatial practice that is relational rather than static, contingent on class, age, place and time, and hence open to revision within the very structures that seem to enforce it.

This argument is developed through three interrelated lines of inquiry. The article asks, first, how Dhaka-set Anglophone novels represent the spatial regulation of women's mobility through purdah across the house, the threshold, the rooftop and the street. It asks, second, through which narrative strategies, particularly focalisation, discourses of permission and restriction, and affect, women's movements are rendered, contested and renegotiated. Third, it considers how these literary geographies converse with documentary discourses on Dhaka's planning, transport and gendered safety. The first question is pursued chiefly through the analysis of domestic and threshold spaces, the second through attention to narrative form, and the third through a contrapuntal reading of the documentary record.

To address these questions, the article integrates feminist geocriticism with spatial narratology. Westphal's (2011) geocriticism shifts attention from a single author's vision to the way multiple texts construct a place. The lens is feminist geography, particularly Massey's (1994) argument that space is relational and gendered. The culturally specific concept comes from Papanek (1973), who sees purdah as "separate worlds" and "symbolic shelter". Said's (1993) contrapuntal reading allows the novels to be juxtaposed with non-literary texts, and Ahmed's (2004) cultural politics of emotion helps to explain how fear, comfort and shame orient bodies in space.

The corpus includes three novels published between 2007 and 2011: TahmimaAnam's A Golden Age (2007) and The Good Muslim (2011), and Shazia Omar's

Like a Diamond in the Sky (2009). They portray Dhaka in three eras – the Liberation War of 1971, the post-war decade culminating in 1984–1985, and the turn of the twenty-first century. The selection allows the study to trace how the spatial grammar of purdah shifts across war, religious revival and neoliberal urbanisation.

The article makes three contributions. Theoretically, it reworks Papanek's concept of symbolic shelter into a dynamic model of negotiated purdah suited to literary analysis. Methodologically, it demonstrates how feminist geocriticism can be combined with contrapuntal documentary reading in a South Asian urban context, where planning and transport discourse rarely registers gender. Critically, it repositions Bangladeshi Anglophone fiction as a resource for feminist urban studies rather than only for postcolonial nation-studies. The article proceeds through a review of relevant scholarship, an account of the theoretical framework and methodology, an analysis of the three novels, and a discussion of findings and their implications.

Literature Review

Feminist Urban Geography and the Gendered Street

Feminist geographers have shown that the division between public and private space is not a neutral fact but a historically produced arrangement that distributes access unequally by gender, class and race (McDowell, 1999; Rose, 1993). Massey (1994) argued that places are not bounded containers but meeting points of social relations, so that the meaning of a street or a home depends on who may enter it, on what terms and with what risks. In her research on the geography of women's fear, Valentine (1989) found that women's fear of public space influenced their routes and timetables, even in the absence of actual violence. In later work, Bondi and Rose (2003) examined the shift in feminist urban geography from documenting women's exclusion to analysing the everyday tactics by which women live in cities.

Literary and cultural studies have pursued their own discussion of the flâneur, the idle male stroller of nineteenth-century Paris. Wolff (1985) suggested that the female counterpart was "invisible" because respectable women could not wander without a chaperone, while Wilson (1991) responded that the city also gave women new freedoms. More recently, Elkin (2016) has revived the flâneuse as a figure of women's creative mobility, and Kern (2020) has applied these arguments to a feminist critique of urban design today. These arguments have been fruitfully extended to South Asia. In Why Loiter? (2011), Phadke, Khan and Ranade stated that although women could be seen in public space, it was only when they had a purpose in doing so (e.g. commuting or shopping), and suggested the need to give them the right to loiter without a reason. Similarly, Ranade(2007) charted how gender is produced through everyday movement in the city. This series of works is significant for the current research because it does not present an opposition between seclusion and freedom. Rather, it demonstrates that access is negotiated in terms of purpose, respectability and accompaniment: the very terms in which purdah is negotiated.

Purdah in Bengal and Bangladesh

Papanek's (1973) essay remains the foundational account of purdah as a social system. She described it through two linked ideas: "separate worlds," in which male and female spheres are spatially and socially divided, and "symbolic shelter," in which seclusion protects women and family honour from the perceived dangers of the outside world. Her earlier study of Pakistan found that medicine and teaching became prestigious

occupations for educated women because a sex-segregated society needed female professionals to serve female clients (Papanek, 1971). This observation will prove important for the analysis of Anam's doctor-heroine Maya. Papanek and Minault's (1982) edited volume *Separate Worlds* extended the comparative study of purdah across the region.

In colonial Bengal, purdah was central to debates about Muslim women's education and reform. Amin (1996) traced how the *andarmahal*, the inner quarters of the household, structured the lives of Bengali Muslim women between 1876 and 1939. Chatterjee (1993) showed how nationalist discourse divided the world into an outer, material domain and an inner, spiritual domain located in the home and the woman. RokeyaSakhawat Hossain's satirical writings on the 'secluded ones' and her inversion of seclusion in Sultana's Dream belong to this context (Hossain, 1988).

Scholarship has, however, complicated any picture of purdah as unchanging in contemporary Bangladesh. Feldman and McCarthy (1983) noted a shift in the social control of rural women, and Amin (1997) observed that purdah remained influential in rural women's choices about work, even under economic pressure. While acknowledging the importance of cultural explanations, Mahmud (1997) warned of the dangers of overemphasising them and thus missing the structural economic inequalities. Kibria (1995) and Kabeer (2000) demonstrated how women garment workers renegotiated household norms on entering urban wage labour, and Feldman (2001) argued for an approach to patriarchy that neither ignores nor exaggerates its power. Usefully, the term "bargaining with patriarchy", coined by Kandiyoti (1988), can be used to make comparisons: women neither simply submit to nor avoid constraints; they negotiate within them. In Egypt, Mahmood (2005) also questioned the idea that piety and agency are in conflict.

Another body of research focuses on purdah as embodied practice rather than seclusion in the home. Rozario (2006) noted that many newly mobile Bangladeshi women, including university students, had started wearing the burqa, and examined the debate over empowerment versus a curtailment of rights. Huq's (2008) ethnography of women's Qur'anic study circles in Dhaka revealed that pious women develop a disciplined and modern religious subjectivity, and a textual mastery that allows them both to be pious and to engage in debate. Rahman (2025) has argued that veiling in rural Bangladesh cannot be reduced to either imposition or free choice, and that women use it to negotiate community expectations while enjoying substantial public mobility. Together with Mahmood's (2005) work, these studies caution against any reading that equates religious observance with a lack of agency. They are essential to a balanced account of how purdah shapes, and is shaped by, women's movement through Dhaka.

Gender and Public Space in Dhaka

Urban research on Dhaka has largely approached public space through informality and livelihoods. Hackenbroch (2013) analysed how access to pavements, streets and open plots is negotiated among competing actors in a city where open space is scarce. Lata, Walters and Roitman (2021) brought gender explicitly into this field. Drawing on interviews with women street vendors in a Dhaka slum, they showed that social and religious norms associated with purdah limit poor Muslim women's access to public space, and that the semi-public "parochial realm" of the neighbourhood offers a safer zone for earning income. Their finding that women's spatial strategies operate between home and street is directly relevant to the threshold spaces analysed below.

Policy and media sources reveal the continued salience of these issues. The BRAC study cited above surveyed 415 respondents in Dhaka, Gazipur and Savar between April

and June 2017 (BRAC, 2018; Dhaka Tribune, 2018). The introduction of a women-only metro coach in 2022 was widely welcomed in the press as a safe space (The Daily Star, 2024a; Dhaka Tribune, 2023). Meanwhile, Dhaka's principal planning instrument, the Detailed Area Plan (2022–2035), gazetted in August 2022 and amended since, has been debated publicly mainly in terms of floor area ratio, building heights and density (The Financial Express, 2022b; bdnews24.com, 2026).

Criticism of Bangladeshi Anglophone Fiction

Quayum and Hasan have done much to establish Bangladeshi literature in English as a field, through special issues and edited collections that trace the tradition from colonial Bengal to the present (Quayum& Hasan, 2018, 2021, 2022). Within this field, TahmimaAnam's work has attracted the most sustained attention. Harputlu Shah (2018) read *A Golden Age* as a feminised narrative of the nation, while Ho (2023) examined transnational meanings of home and identity in the novel. Chakraborty and Shabnam (2025) argued in *South Asian Review* that the novel valorises its heroine as the ideal wartime mother while marginalising other mothers from national memory. A recent thesis by Haque (2023) attends to the home and the female body as spaces of witnessing during the war. Shazia Omar's *Like a Diamond in the Sky* has received attention mainly in reviews, which describe it as a portrait of addiction and alienation in Dhaka (Bartholomew, 2020).

Three gaps follow from this review. First, criticism of Bangladeshi Anglophone fiction has focused on nation, memory and diaspora, with only occasional attention to space and almost none to the city as a gendered geography. Haque's (2023) attention to women's spaces is the closest precursor, but it is framed through trauma and witnessing rather than urban mobility. Second, social-science research on purdah and Dhaka's public space has rarely drawn on literary texts, which offer access to the affective and imaginative dimensions of spatial experience that surveys and planning documents cannot capture. Third, the theoretical vocabulary of feminist geography and the *flâneuse* debate has been developed largely in Euro-American and Indian contexts, and has not been tested against the specific spatial grammar of purdah in a Muslim-majority Bengali city. This article addresses all three gaps by reading Dhaka fiction through a feminist geocritical framework that takes purdah as its central concept.

Theoretical Framework: Towards Negotiated Purdah

Feminist Geocriticism

Westphal's (2011) geocriticism proposes a geocentred rather than ego-centred approach to literature. Instead of asking how one author imagines a place, it asks how a place emerges across many texts and points of view. Westphal stresses multifocalisation, polysensoriality and the stratigraphic, layered character of literary space. Tally (2013) situates this within a broader spatial turn in the humanities, in which literary works are read as forms of mapping that orient readers in social space. Geocriticism, however, does not by itself attend to gender. It needs to be combined with feminist geography's insistence that the production of space is also the production of gendered subjects. Massey (1994) argued that the limitation of women's mobility, in terms of both identity and space, has been a crucial means of subordination, and that the meanings of place are always contested. Lefebvre's (1991) distinction between conceived, perceived and lived space is also useful. It allows the planner's map, the everyday route and the felt experience of a place to be treated as distinct but connected layers. Read this way, a novel becomes a record of lived space that can be set against the conceived space of planning documents.

Purdah as Separate Worlds and Symbolic Shelter

Papanek's (1973) account provides the culturally specific concept that general feminist geographies lack. Her idea of "separate worlds" is a reflection of both the spatial and social separation of the world of men from the world of women. Her idea of "symbolic shelter" reflects the moral logic that justifies that division: seclusion is presented as protection, of women from the outside and of society from the disruptive power of desire. For this one, two points in Papanek's argument are key. First, she sees purdah not as an unchangeable system, but as one that is flexible in itself, seclusion varies with the life stage, class and kinship. Secondly, she shows how there are spaces for female mobility within the system itself, such as in the professions which serve a segregated clientele (Papanek, 1971). Then, the notion of purdah is more constricting. It also creates the circumstances which allow some women's movement to be legitimate.

This article extends Papanek by introducing a narrative and relational dimension. Drawing on Kandiyoti's (1988) idea of bargaining with patriarchy and on Mahmood's (2005) critique of equating agency with resistance, it treats purdah as a space of negotiation. Women and their kin bargain over thresholds, permissions and purposes, and the terms of the bargain shift with war, religious revival and economic change. I term this field *negotiated purdah*. The concept has three dimensions, summarised in Table 1.

Table 1
Dimensions of negotiated purdah

Dimension	Guiding question	Key sources
Threshold	Where does the boundary between inside and outside fall, and how permeable is it?	Papanek (1973); Massey (1994); Bakhtin (1981)
Permission	Who authorises a woman's movement, for what purpose and with whom?	Kandiyoti (1988); Phadke et al. (2011); Lazar (2007)
Affect	How do fear, comfort, shame and desire orient the body towards or away from space?	Ahmed (2004, 2006); Young (1980); Valentine (1989)

The concept must also accommodate women's own religious commitments, which feminist debates about purdah have often treated as secondary. For many Muslim women, modest dress and conduct are not concessions extracted by kin but expressions of faith, ethical self-cultivation and belonging (Mahmood, 2005). Abu-Lughod (2002) has warned that framing veiled women primarily as in need of rescue obscures the meanings they themselves attach to their practice. Research in Bangladesh supports this caution. Kibria's (2022) life-history interviews with two generations of educated women in Dhaka found that the hijab served them as a means of navigating, and at times resisting, postcolonial and patriarchal power structures, with religiosity transmitted through families and reworked by younger women into a self-defined identity. In negotiated purdah, then, women are not only the objects of bargaining but principal negotiators, and their choices may include choosing purdah itself.

Spatial Narratology

Geocriticism tells us what spaces a text constructs; narratology tells us how. Bakhtin's (1981) concept of the chronotope describes the fusion of time and space in narrative, and he identified the threshold as a chronotope of crisis and decision. This makes the threshold a natural focus for an analysis of purdah, which is fundamentally a regime of thresholds. Genette (1980) and Bal (2009) provide the vocabulary of focalisation: the question of whose perception organises the narrative. Focalisation matters for gendered geography because the right to look at the city is itself unevenly distributed. A woman who is the object of the street's gaze and a woman who is the subject through whom the street is seen occupy very different narrative positions. De Certeau's (1984) distinction between

the panoramic view of the planner and the tactical practice of the walker adds a further layer, linking narrative perspective to the politics of movement.

Affect and Orientation

Ahmed's (2004) cultural politics of emotion argues that emotions are not private states but social forces that shape the surfaces of bodies and collectives. Fear, in particular, contains bodies; it makes some spaces feel unavailable. In *Queer Phenomenology*, Ahmed (2006) extends this into a theory of orientation, showing how bodies are directed towards some objects and spaces and away from others by habit and social expectation. Young's (1980) phenomenology of feminine bodily comportment complements this by showing how women learn to inhabit a restricted space around the body. Together these accounts help to explain how purdah operates even when no wall is present: as an internalised orientation that makes the street feel hostile and the home feel safe, or, in moments of crisis, reverses those feelings.

Contrapuntal Reading

Finally, Said's (1993) contrapuntal method, developed to read canonical novels alongside the imperial histories they occlude, is adapted here to read Dhaka fiction alongside the documentary record of the city. The aim is not to test the novels for accuracy but to place two kinds of knowledge in conversation. Planning documents and survey reports describe the city in aggregate and abstract terms. The novels render the textures of permission, risk and desire that such documents cannot hold. Each, read against the other, exposes what the other leaves out.

Methodology

Research Design

This qualitative study integrates feminist geocriticism (Westphal, 2011) with spatial narratology, drawing on Massey's (1994) gendered conception of space and Papanek's (1973) conceptualisation of purdah as "symbolic shelter." It is interpretive rather than empirical: the novels are treated as cultural texts that construct, rather than merely reflect, Dhaka's gendered geography. The design has four stages: purposive corpus selection, close reading and thematic coding, contrapuntal reading against documentary sources, and theoretical synthesis.

Corpus and Selection Criteria

The corpus consists of Anglophone novels set in Dhaka and published between 2007 and 2011. Texts were included if they met three criteria: (a) Dhaka is the primary narrative setting rather than an episodic location; (b) the novel was originally written in English by an author of Bangladeshi origin; and (c) the text engages substantively with movement through urban space, women's access to that space, or both. Novels set mainly outside Dhaka, translations from Bangla and short fiction were excluded to keep the corpus comparable. Table 2 summarises the resulting corpus.

Table 2
The corpus

Novel	Author, year	Historical setting	Principal focaliser(s)	Role in the corpus
A Golden Age	TahmimaAnam, 2007	Dhaka, 1971 (with a 1959 prologue)	RehanaHaque, a widowed mother	The domestic interior under war

Novel	Author, year	Historical setting	Principal focaliser(s)	Role in the corpus
The Good Muslim	TahmimaAnam, 2011	Dhaka and rural Bangladesh, 1971–1985	Maya Haque, a doctor; SohailHaque	Post-war mobility and religious revival
Like a Diamond in the Sky	Shazia Omar, 2009	Dhaka at the turn of the twenty-first century	Deen, a male university student	A masculine counterpoint

The three novels allow comparison across three historical moments in the city. Including a male-focalised novel is deliberate. Feminist geography has shown that women's spatial exclusion is often most visible in representations of men's freedom (Rose, 1993; Wolff, 1985). Omar's novel therefore serves as a contrapuntal control text that reveals, through its masculine itinerary, the spaces from which women are absent.

Close Reading and Thematic Coding

Each novel was read in full at least twice. In the first reading, every passage depicting movement, spatial boundaries, thresholds or access to public space was marked. In the second, these passages were coded using a framework derived from the three dimensions of negotiated purdah outlined in the theoretical framework and refined inductively as the reading proceeded, following the reflexive thematic analysis outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). The final coding frame comprised eight codes, presented in Table 3.

Table 3
Coding frame

Code	Focus of analysis
Threshold spaces	Gates, verandahs, doorways, rooftops and courtyards
Vehicles and enclosures	Rickshaws, cars, buses and trains
Permission and prohibition	Who allows or forbids movement, and in what language
Purpose	The justification attached to a woman's presence outside, such as work, care, worship or emergency
Gaze and focalisation	Who looks, who is looked at, and through whose eyes the city is seen
Affect	Fear, shame, comfort, longing and exhilaration attached to spaces
Sheltering and harbouring	The protective function of the home and its reversals
Absence and silence	Spaces the narrative does not enter, or that women do not enter

Qualitative data analysis software can support the organisation of coded excerpts, but no frequency counts were used; the codes served to organise interpretation, not to quantify it.

Contrapuntal Reading of Documentary Sources

Coded passages were then read against a set of documentary sources selected for their bearing on gendered mobility in Dhaka (Table 4).

Table 4
Documentary sources used in the contrapuntal reading

Source	Type	Relevance
RAJUK, *Detailed Area Plan (2022–2035)*, gazetted August 2022, and its reported amendments	Planning instrument	How the city is conceived in official space
BRAC (2018) study on harassment in public transport, as reported in the Bangladeshi press	Research report	Women's reported experience of the street and vehicle
Press reporting on Dhaka's women-only metro coach, 2022–2024	Newspaper reports	Contemporary institutional responses to gendered risk

Source	Type	Relevance
Lata et al. (2021); Hackenbroch (2013)	Social-science studies	Ethnographic evidence on access to Dhaka's public space

The documents and the novels are not treated as evidence for one another. They are set in counterpoint, so that the abstractions of planning and survey are tested against literary representations of lived space, and the novels' imaginative claims are tested against the documented city.

Positionality

Feminist research requires the researcher to acknowledge the situated character of knowledge (Haraway, 1988). The author reads these novels as a Bangladeshi male academic based in Dhaka, trained in English literary studies and familiar at first hand with the city's everyday geography. This position offers familiarity with the places, idioms and norms the novels depict, including the unspoken rules of purdah that a reader from outside the region might misread. As a male reader of fiction about women's spatial experience, however, the author stands outside much of what the novels depict, which calls for interpretive caution. The position carries other risks too: the familiarity of the material may make some patterns seem natural, and a middle-class urban vantage point may underweight the experiences of working-class women, who are largely absent from the corpus itself. To mitigate these risks, interpretations were checked against the secondary literature and against the documentary sources, and divergent readings by other critics are acknowledged where they arise.

A second dimension of positionality concerns religion. Many feminist studies of purdah have been undertaken from a secular-liberal perspective which may misread religious piety as passivity (Mahmood, 2005). In order to protect against this, the study distinguishes between purdah as seclusion and purdah as modest dress and piety, viewing the latter as a legitimate and often voluntary practice, and treats the novels' critical portrayal of religious revival as something to be analysed rather than embraced by the article.

Trustworthiness and Limitations

Transparency is the key to rigour in literary research. The study therefore makes its corpus criteria, coding frame and theoretical lenses explicit, substantiates each claim with textual evidence, and places the readings in current criticism. It is important to keep in mind three limitations. First, the corpus is small and dominated by one author, so the results are offered as an analytical framework to be evaluated on other corpora rather than as an overview of the field. Secondly, each of the three novels centres on a middle-class or elite protagonist, and thus offers little insight into poor women's mobility. Thirdly, the documentary sources postdate the novels. The temporal gap is intentional, as the contrapuntal approach aims to bring historical fiction into conversation with the present city, but it does not claim causal links between literature and policy.

Results and Discussion

The House That Harbours: Inverting Symbolic Shelter in *A Golden Age*

A Golden Age opens not in the street but at a grave. In 1959 the newly widowed RehanaHaque speaks to her dead husband at his grave to tell him that she has lost their children (Anam, 2007). The loss is a spatial one. Her children are taken to live with her husband's brother and his wife in Lahore, more than a thousand miles away in West Pakistan, because the family and the court judge a widow unable to provide for them. The

novel's first spatial fact, then, is that a woman without a husband has no secure claim to the domestic interior that purdah supposedly guarantees her. Symbolic shelter, in Papanek's (1973) sense, is shown to be conditional on male presence.

Rehana's answer is: "build." The novel's title alludes to Shona, the bungalow she constructs on her land in Dhanmondi and leases to a Hindu family, the Senguptas. This income helps her to retrieve her children and every year she celebrates the return of her children with a party at the family house on Road 5 (Anam, 2007). This is a very important spatial approach. Rehana does not go to work or onto the street, she is independent without entering into the realm of respectability. The situation is similar to Lata et al.'s (2021) finding of street vendors in modern-day Dhaka who were able to make a living without violating norms in their "parochial realm" of the neighbourhood. In a broad class divide, both agency types are negotiated, not fought against, within purdah.

This is reversed by the war of 1971. When the Senguptas leave Shona, Sohail (Rehana's son) and his friends make it their base for guerrilla operations (Anam, 2007). Later, a wounded guerrilla commander, known as the Major, is brought to the house to be nursed, and he and Rehana become lovers (Anam, 2007). This is the most dramatic spatial inversion in the novel. The domestic interior is the space that the codes of purdah encode as feminine, non-political and protected. For this very reason it is an ideal hiding place for insurgency. The sanctuary that was supposed to be a safe haven for women is now a safe haven for the outside world's fighters from the state. Shelter turns into literal cover.

This inversion is encapsulated in a small domestic gesture. As the tenants depart, Rehana wraps their crockery in newspapers whose censored columns leave blank spaces among the advertisements (Anam, 2007). The household's objects are wrapped in a public sphere silenced by military censorship. In 1971 the political and the domestic merge, and the suppressed public sphere resides in the home.

Permission is given in the novel in a generational and gendered manner. Rehana moves because of her maternal duty and Maya leaves Dhaka for Calcutta (Anam, 2007) due to her political involvement. This aligns with the idea of valorisingRehana as the ideal wartime mother as put forth by Chakraborty and Shabnam (2025). The spatial reading is another: Motherhood in the novel is a sort of permission. Rehana's wrongdoings (sin) are made visible as she hosts fighters in her house and falls in love with the Major and does so under the guise of her children. The novel expands the scope of permissible activities for a woman within the purdah, but does not call into question the purdah. This sort of pattern is supported by the neighbourhood women who sew together. They collaborate together in the parochial sphere and the war provides them with additional functions without going into the street (Anam, 2007).

The pattern is confirmed by focalisation. The street of 1971 is experienced primarily through Rehana's perception, so that what we get is primarily from news, rumour and the reports of her children. The city of war is therefore constructed in layers, from the threshold towards the outside. In Bakhtin's (1981) terminology, the novel's dominant chronotope is the threshold: the gateway, the garden path between the two houses, the room in which the Major lies. These are the sites where decisions are made and where the distinction between inside and outside is challenged.

The Roof and the Clinic: *The Good Muslim*

In *The Good Muslim*, the spatial grammar of the first novel is reorganised by two forces: the professional mobility of a woman doctor and the domestic architecture of

religious revival. The novel alternates between the immediate aftermath of the war, beginning in 1971–1972, and the years 1984–1985 (Anam, 2011). In 1984 Maya returns to her mother's house in Dhaka after seven years practising medicine in a rural community, following the death of her brother's wife, Silvi (Anam, 2011).

Maya's mobility is legitimated by her profession. Papanek (1971) observed that in sex-segregated societies, medicine became one of the most respected occupations for educated women, because female patients required female practitioners. Maya's career is based on this very rationale. In the novel's post-war chapters, her work with survivors of wartime rape takes her into spaces closed to men, including women's bodies and their shame (Anam, 2011). Her later years in the countryside are similarly justified by service. Medicine thus provides Maya with a purdah-compatible purpose which authorises her to cross the boundaries purdah draws. This is an obvious example of negotiated purdah: a system that produces a role which allows its own limits to be stretched.

Maya has now moved back into her house, but it has changed. Her brother, Sohail, the former guerrilla, has turned into a preacher who addresses gatherings of men and women in burqas on the roof of the family home (Anam, 2011; see also Chabal, 2011). The roof deserves close attention. In the very dense urban landscape of Dhaka, the rooftop is a vertical threshold – part of the private house but open to the sky and to neighbouring roofs. It has long been used as a semi-private area for women's leisure and washing, and for meeting together, making it a space for women. In the novel it becomes a place of religious teaching and worship, organised according to the modesty and separation of the sexes that the congregation practises. The house that was home to guerrillas in 1971 is now home to a congregation.

This rooftop has two readings and a balanced analysis should take both into account. The first is Maya's worldly perspective, which is the prevailing one in the story. She feels the meetings are an unwelcome addition to her childhood home and must re-think the way she fits into the home. The novel encourages this reading, but it is a character's reading, not a neutral description of the activity of religion. Maya does not utter the second reading in the text, but it is there. The women climbing to the roof are here of their own free will to learn and to pray together. Their presence, in itself, is a mobility and a collective presence of women in a semi-public space. So, these women are not confined to their homes by modest clothing, rather it is one of the reasons they are able to come together outside the home with confidence. This is directly relevant to Mahmood's (2005) notion that pious practice can be an expression of agency as opposed to its absence. A geocritical approach that refuses a single perspective is able to reclaim this second reading, and in so doing acknowledges a weakness of the novel: the congregation's women have no voices of their own and are seen only through Maya's eyes.

This second reading is supported by ethnographic evidence. Kibria (2022) found that younger women in Dhaka were carrying the religious instruction they received at home into adulthood, thereby creating a new form of religiosity that had the potential to alter their structural and cultural status in Bangladeshi society. Read alongside these findings, the congregation on the roof seems to be a place where faith, sociability and self-identification come together, and where a simple gesture of coming together in modest clothing can be a way to feel a sense of belonging – and not just compliance. The novel, however, does not allow the women to explain their motives, so the analysis cannot assume that their attendance was freely chosen, or that it was coerced. The rooftop remains an open question in the text, and that openness is part of the spatial grammar of negotiated purdah.

One of the main themes in this part of the novel is affect. Maya's return brings disorientation, as defined by Ahmed (2006): a house that no longer faces the way Maya expects. The familiar threshold of her mother's house has become strange. The conflict between brother and sister comes to a head when Sohail decides to send his son, Zaid, to a madrasa (Anam, 2011). The child's removal to an all-male religious institution is the final reorganisation of the family's geography. Through the dispute over his schooling, the family's spatial negotiations extend into the setting of institutional religious education.

The Masculine Drift: *Like a Diamond in the Sky*

Shazia Omar's novel provides the corpus's contrapuntal centre. Its protagonist, Deen, is a twenty-one-year-old university student addicted to heroin, whose dependency draws him and his affluent friends into the drug economy of the city's poorer neighbourhoods (Omar, 2009). Reviewers have noted that the novel moves from informal settlements to the affluent diplomatic quarter (Bartholomew, 2020), and its cast includes a rickshaw puller, street singers and a drug dealer as well as students.

What this itinerary makes visible is the gendered condition of free movement. Deen's drift across class boundaries, at all hours and without stated purpose, is precisely the form of mobility that Phadke et al. (2011) identify as unavailable to women: loitering without justification. Deen is a Dhaka *flâneur*, albeit an abject one, and his freedom to wander is underwritten by his male body. Omar has remarked that she chose a male protagonist for her first novel in order to explore something distant from her own experience (Naz&Arefin, 2024). Read geocritically, that choice is itself significant. To render the city's night-time underside, a woman author found it narratively necessary to adopt a male focaliser.

The narrative is organised around Deen's itinerary, and the city's streets, alleys and night-time spaces are encountered through his movements (Bartholomew, 2020; Omar, 2009). Women's relative absence from these circuits is not an oversight but a structural feature of the novel's geography. In this sense *Like a Diamond in the Sky* functions as a negative image of the Anam novels. Where those texts construct the city from the threshold outward, Omar's constructs it from the street, and in doing so reveals how far the street remains a masculine domain at the turn of the century.

Contrapuntal Readings: The Novels and the Documented City

Setting these literary geographies against the documentary record sharpens their significance. The BRAC study found that most women commuters who experienced harassment stayed silent or moved away from the harasser (BRAC, 2018; The Financial Express, 2018). This is an affective geography of avoidance of the kind Valentine (1989) described, and it corresponds closely to the orientations the novels dramatise. In both, fear does not simply exclude women from space; it trains their bodies to withdraw.

The women-only metro coach, which came into operation in 2022, is an even more suggestive counterpoint (The Financial Express, 2022a). According to press reports, the coach is a haven guarded by female police officers (The Daily Star, 2024a, 2024b). In one report, a woman said that her sons, who had previously told her it was unsafe for her to travel alone, now urged her to visit her sister, but only by metro (The Daily Star, 2024a). The statement is a very good description of negotiated purdah. The woman's mobility increases, but the right to grant it is held by male relatives and is conditional on a separate, secure space. The women's coach is symbolic shelter on wheels: purdah made mobile. Like

Rehana's house and Maya's job, it extends women's access to the city through protection rather than in opposition to it.

Finally, the Detailed Area Plan illustrates how the city's conceived space, in Lefebvre's (1991) terms, is articulated. Press coverage of the plan since its gazetting in August 2022 has centred on floor area ratio, building heights, density and land-use classification (The Financial Express, 2022b; bdnews24.com, 2026). Gendered mobility has not featured prominently in that public debate. A full gender audit of the plan's provisions is beyond the scope of this article and remains an important task for future research. What the contrapuntal reading shows, however, is that the forms of spatial knowledge the novels hold, about thresholds, permissions and fear, sit largely outside the vocabulary in which the city's future is being publicly debated.

Three Modalities of Negotiated Purdah

The analysis identifies three modalities through which the corpus represents purdah as a negotiated spatial practice. They are summarised in Table 5 and then discussed in relation to the article's three lines of inquiry.

Table 5
Three modalities of negotiated purdah in the corpus

Modality	Primary text	Spatial figure	How purdah is negotiated	Limit of the negotiation
The shelter that harbours	*A Golden Age*	The house and the garden threshold	The protected interior is turned to political use; property and motherhood authorise action	Agency stays inside the house and depends on maternal legitimacy
The vertical threshold and the professional licence	*The Good Muslim*	The rooftop and the clinic	A purdah-compatible profession authorises travel; the roof becomes a semi-public religious space	The home is reorganised around religious gatherings; the novel views them mainly through its secular heroine and leaves the pious women's own perspective unvoiced
The masculine drift	*Like a Diamond in the Sky*	The street at night	Free movement is shown to depend on a male body; women's absence is structural	The novel does not imagine an equivalent female itinerary

With regard to how the novels represent the spatial regulation of women's mobility, the corpus depicts that regulation not as a single boundary between home and street but as a series of thresholds, each with its own rules. The garden path between Rehana's two houses, the stairs to Sohail's rooftop congregation and the rural clinic where Maya practises are all places where the terms of access are reset. This finding supports Massey's (1994) relational view of space and gives it culturally specific content: in Dhaka fiction, it is purdah that defines the relations through which a place becomes accessible or closed.

In the representation and re-imagining of women's movement three narrative strategies are important. The focalisation of the city is the point of view from which it is viewed: Anam's novels are constructed from the threshold, Omar's from the street. Movement is controlled by discourses of permission, as motherhood and the medical profession are licences for women to move, while male kin retain control of movement, as the metro commuter's account demonstrates. Affect is a way of describing the ways in which space feels: the shelter of the home is one thing in one moment, another in another; the fear that is recorded in the survey data is internalised as an orientation that pulls women away from the street.

The contrapuntal reading of literary and documentary geographies shows that the novels follow a logic shared by the documentary record. Both expand women's access to the city mostly through protection: the sheltering house, the purdah-friendly profession, the guarded women's coach. Both, however, keep the power to grant that access essentially where it is. The planning discourse that publicly discusses the city's future, meanwhile, speaks predominantly of density, height and land use, and fails to acknowledge the textures of permission and fear that the novels bring to light.

Beyond the Invisible *Flâneuse*

These findings contribute to the long debate about women's urban mobility. Wolff (1985) argued that the *flâneuse* was invisible in the literature of modernity, while Wilson (1991) and Elkin (2016) emphasised the freedoms the city offered women.

The Dhaka corpus suggests a third figure, the woman of the threshold, who fits neither position. She is neither caged nor set free. She moves through the city by associating her mobility with a recognised cause – care, healing, worship, protecting kin – and wherever crises or callings enlarge the range of legitimate purposes, so does her mobility. This is in line with Phadke et al. (2011), who argue that South Asian women are tolerated in public only when they demonstrate purpose. The novels present the other side of that argument: purpose is not just a constraint; it is a resource that women use.

Revisiting Symbolic Shelter

The study also extends Papanek's (1973) account of purdah. Papanek called the moral logic which keeps women in their household place symbolic shelter. The corpus shows that shelter is portable and transferable. It can be moved from the house to a job, from a job to a secure vehicle and even, during a national crisis, from women to others whom women themselves protect. The newest institutional variant of this portability is the women-only metro coach. Its most common personal form is modest clothing, worn to university, work or the market by the many Bangladeshi women who wear the hijab or burqa: here modesty is not confined to the home but follows the body, and is often seen positively, as enabling women to participate in the world (Rahman, 2025; Rozario, 2006). Conceptualised as a moving shelter rather than a fixed place, negotiated purdah accounts for both the continuity of seclusion in Dhaka and the real increase in women's presence in society. In this respect the analysis agrees with Kandiyoti's (1988) bargaining model and with Mahmood's (2005) warning against viewing every act of piety as submission, while maintaining, like Feldman (2001), that the frameworks within which bargains are made remain patriarchal.

Recent Bangladeshi scholarship has explained how this personal form of purdah is enacted in everyday life. Mamun and Huq (2023) have discussed some of the factors that encourage female university students to wear the hijab, a group whose veiling Rozario (2006) had already associated with their newly found mobility. Rahman (2025) shows that rural women adopt the burqa to meet community expectations while also resisting its prescribed styles, so that veiling becomes neither simple imposition nor unconstrained choice but an ongoing practice of self-making. These findings refine the concept proposed here. Negotiated purdah includes the woman who veils out of conviction, the woman who veils to belong and the woman who veils under pressure. The spatial consequences of each differ, and the novels, read against this scholarship, gain significance precisely where they leave such distinctions open.

Implications for Bangladeshi Anglophone Criticism and Geocriticism

For the criticism of Bangladeshi literature in English, the study demonstrates the value of moving beyond the nation-and-memory paradigm that has dominated readings of Anam's work (Chakraborty &Shabnam, 2025; Harputlu Shah, 2018; Ho, 2023). A spatial reading does not displace those concerns; it grounds them. Rehana's role as the ideal mother of the nation, for example, is inseparable from the house in which that role is performed. Reading the house as a gendered geography reveals how national memory is anchored in particular thresholds and permissions.

For geocriticism, the study shows the need for a gendered approach to multifocalisation. Westphal (2011) recommends reading a place through many viewpoints, but in a gendered city the distribution of viewpoints is itself unequal. A feminist geocriticism must therefore attend not only to the range of perspectives a corpus offers but also to the perspectives it lacks. The absence of a female street-walker in this corpus, and Omar's decision to write the street through a male focaliser, are not neutral facts. They are evidence of the very geography under study.

Conclusion

This article has argued that purdah is not a static boundary between the house and the street but a negotiated, spatially situated practice. Across three novels and three historical moments, women's movement is permitted, constrained and renegotiated in the face of war, vocation and new infrastructure, such as the metro. In A Golden Age, the sheltered inner world is home to guerrillas and motherhood is a licence for transgression. In The Good Muslim, a woman doctor is carried across boundaries by the job she goes out to do, while religious revival redraws those boundaries on the roof of her family house. Like a Diamond in the Sky exposes, by contrast, the structural absence of women from the city's streets through the freedom of a male drifter. Read against the documented city, these literary geographies follow a shared logic in which women's access expands primarily through protection, while the authority to grant it often remains with men.

The article's principal contribution is the concept of *negotiated purdah*, which reworks Papanek's symbolic shelter into a relational and portable model suited to literary and cultural analysis. The concept explains how seclusion can persist even as women's presence in the city grows, and it offers a vocabulary for reading gendered mobility in other Muslim-majority South Asian cities. Methodologically, the study shows that feminist geocriticism, spatial narratology and contrapuntal documentary reading can be combined productively, and that a gendered geocriticism must attend to the viewpoints a corpus lacks as well as those it contains.

Recommendations

Several directions for future research follow from these findings. The model of negotiated purdah should first be tested on a larger and more varied body of Dhaka writing, including short fiction, poetry, life writing, novels published after 2011 and English translations of Bangla fiction, which are more likely to represent the mobility of working-class women. Relatedly, the near-absence of the garment worker, the domestic worker and the woman street vendor from Anglophone fiction deserves sustained inquiry, ideally in dialogue with ethnographic research such as that of Lata et al. (2021). Comparative studies of fiction set in Dhaka, Karachi, Lahore and Kolkata could establish whether negotiated purdah describes a regional spatial grammar or a specifically Bangladeshi one. Qualitative literary mapping of characters' routes would, in addition,

make the zones of access and avoidance that the novels construct visible to readers beyond literary studies.

The findings also carry practical implications. A systematic gender audit of RAJUK's Detailed Area Plan (2022–2035) and related transport policies would establish how far Dhaka's planning instruments address women's mobility. Planners and transport authorities could, in turn, draw on cultural texts as records of lived spatial experience, and literary scholars can support that dialogue through interdisciplinary and public-facing work. Any such engagement should respect the diversity of women's own choices, including those of the many women for whom modest dress and religious observance are integral to how they move through the city.

In imagining a Ladyland where women govern the streets, RokeyaSakhawat Hossain made purdah the subject of speculative fiction more than a century ago. The novels examined here are less utopian. They show a city in which women's movement is still bargained for at every threshold. But in showing how those bargains are struck and restruck, they also show that the threshold is a place where the city can change.

Declarations

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Ethical Considerations

No human subjects or personal information was used in this study. It is based exclusively on published books that are accessible to the public (and publisher descriptions and epitexts) cited in the references. Ethical approval was not necessary.

AI Use Statement

Generative AI (ChatGpt and Grammarly) was used for language editing and condensing text. It was not used for the data collection, coding the corpus and drawing findings. All text generated by AI is reviewed and edited by the author, and the author is responsible for the article's content.

Data Availability Statement

The data analysed are all published data, as mentioned in the references. The 39 corpus books are listed verifying, with the verification sources. The coding frame and coded dataset are available on reasonable request from the author.

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