



Coding Out the Female Voice: Gendered Silences in Tahmima Anam's *The Startup Wife*

Ms. T. Narmatha¹, Ms. G. Dharshini², Dr. K. Deepa³ & Dr. S. Geetha⁴

^{1&2}Ph.D. Research Scholar, Department of English (Aided)
Sri GVG Visalakshi College for Women, Udumalpet, Tamil Nadu
^{3&4}Assistant Professor, Department of English (Aided)
Sri GVG Visalakshi College for Women, Udumalpet, Tamil Nadu



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Abstract

Tahmima Anam's masterfully crafted novel, *The Startup Wife*, critiques marginalisation of women in the digital culture. This novel emphasises the necessity of women's empowerment in the technological domain. This paper examines the gender bias that occurs in the technological field. It talks about the discrimination of women in the current world in tech firms through the protagonist, Asha Ray. It analyses how digital culture reproduces patriarchal power structures through the titular startup wife, Asha who starts a new venture together with her husband, Cyrus, in New York's tech incubator called Utopia. Ultimately, it addresses the gender discrimination in STEM industries while also envisioning possibilities of women's empowerment.

Keywords: Digital culture, gender bias, hi-tech, discrimination.

Tahmima Anam (1975-present), the outstanding British author of Bangladeshi origin, has won the Commonwealth Writers Prize for her first novel, *A Golden Age* (2007). She is a prolific writer who was one of the nominees for the Man Asian Literary Prize in 2011 for her second novel, *The Good Muslim* (2011). The literary magazine, *Granta*, placed her on the list of "Best of Young British Novelists" in 2013. She has also won the O. Henry Award for her short story, *Garments*, in 2015. She was elected as a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature in 2017. Her third novel, *The Bones of Grace*, was published in 2016. Her fourth novel, *The Startup Wife*, which was published in 2021 was opted as the best book

of 2021 by magazines including *Red*, *Stylist*, and *Cosmopolitan*.

The Startup Wife (2021) questions the role of women in digital culture. Though it talks about marriage, race, sex, love and friendship, its main theme is centered on the gender bias and exclusion of women in the Hi-Tech horizon. It is one of the few novels that expounds on the importance of empowering women in the Hi-Tech industry, where they are marginalised. Asha Ray who is the daughter of Bangladeshi immigrant pharmacists who settled in America, narrates the entire novel. She is an exceptional coder and a Ph.D. student at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. She works



in the AI lab at MIT with keen interest every day. She has tattooed the first six digits of Pi on her left shoulder. It shows her passion for working in the technological field.

Anam's portrayal of Asha gives a picture of the endeavors made by women to reach the highest position in this Hi-Tech in recent years. One day, Asha meets her high school crush, Cyrus Jones, at the funeral of her high school teacher, Mrs. Butterfield. Cyrus dropped out of high school and so Asha didn't see him for a long time. The funeral gave her a chance to reunite with him. They both get married after two months without the knowledge of their parents. They both vibrantly exchanged marital vows. One day, Asha tells her parents about her marriage to Cyrus. She introduces him to them as a humanist spirit guide who studies world religions in a non-religious way. Their lives go smoothly. Cyrus talks about his idea of making non-religious people connecting together for rituals. He thinks about creating secular ceremonies so that nonreligious people and others can do rituals and prayers without the burden of religion.

Asha wants to implement Cyrus' idea successfully. She plans on executing his idea via social networking. As she needs to put her efforts sincerely into this work, she quits her Ph.D. It's not easy for a woman to quit something she is into and start a new venture. It needs immense courage and determination. Asha possesses the courage and so she quits her Ph.D. and starts writing an algorithm that creates personalised ceremonies, atheist prayers and yoga funerals based on people's interests and beliefs. Asha says, "I just said I could code an algorithm that would allow people to get a kind of Cyrus ritual, you know, a combination of all their things, wrapped up in a little modern package, without the sexism, homophobia, and burning in the fires of hell of actual religion" (Anam, 2021, Love and Marriage, 46).

Cyrus's friend Jules joins the couple in their new venture. With his help, Cyrus and Asha move to New York, where they get a chance to work at Utopia, a tech startup incubator situated in the heart of Manhattan. Utopia looks forward to an app that could make mankind live happily after apocalypse and the "post-world world" (Anam, 2021, Prologue, 7). The trio starts their work there. Asha's algorithm is facilitated by AI and it is attached to a social

networking platform called "WAI" (We Are Infinite). This startup spreads like wildfire, catching the attention of millions. It gains momentum every day reaching a massive audience. It is used by millions of people who want customised rituals. Asha becomes ecstatic. She even imagines writing a marriage guide about her success on the topic, *The Startup Wife: How To Succeed in Business and Marriage at the Same Time*.

Frank, who enjoys the highest positions in Utopia, asks Jules about the roles of Jules, Cyrus and Asha in the startup. Jules replies that all three of them are co-founders. When Frank talks about assigning the position of CEO to one of these three people, Jules suggests Asha as the CEO since the entire platform was devised by her. But Frank wants Cyrus to be the CEO though he knows very well the role played by Asha. Here is the boardroom sexism. Men couldn't endure women occupying the highest positions. This happens everywhere and in the case of the technological field, the case is even worse. Cyrus becomes the CEO.

Gender bias in the workplace is evident in every walk of life. Most of the CEOs and senior leaders are men. Technology has been the foremost domain dominated by men for many decades. Statistics report that only 17% of the workers fall under the category of women as software developers, system designers and business analysts in the tech sector in the UK (Davies 2022). "The United States science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) labor force represents only 23% of the total U.S. labor force. In the European Union, women make up only 19.1% of the ICT (information and communication technology) sector" (Radulovski, n.d.). When the position of women in the tech field in super-powered UK and USA is pitiable, the condition of women in developing countries is still more pitiable. Such is the case of Asha, who is not given the position of CEO.

WAI became a great success. The users of WAI start uploading photos and videos about their rituals. Some of them printed T-shirts and hats with the theme of WAI. Cyrus starts making money out of the app and he ignores suggestions of Asha regarding the monetization out of the app. She is gradually excluded from the venture. She doesn't take it seriously at the



beginning since she wants to see her husband in a bigger picture. The press wants to know the entire story behind WAI. The entire fame is bestowed on Cyrus, who is even called ‘New Messiah’ by the users. Asha is the creator of the startup but Cyrus becomes the face of it. She is forsaken. Cyrus has also contributed to the startup but it is Asha who is the prime contributor. It shows how women get ignored in the digital culture despite the vital role they play. Strong sexism prevails there and women still face hurdles in their career in technoscience. The following lines from the work *TechnoFeminism* written by Judy Wajcman echo the same point.

So, the traditional basis for men’s domination of scientific, engineering and technical institutions has been well and truly undermined. Yet women still face considerable barriers when they attempt to pursue a professional or managerial career in technoscience. It is necessary therefore to revisit the liberal feminist agenda of equal opportunities, and not to regard it simply as superseded. Women are missing out on good jobs in the knowledge economy, thereby impeding their financial independence. While the labour market remains so strongly sex-segregated and marked by a gender pay gap, social justice in employment will continue to elude us. (Wajcman 110)

The Hi-Tech horizon has several limitations for women. People refuse to accept both men and women as equals in this field. This helpless situation of Asha springs from Anam’s own experience. Anam might have faced a similar situation as Asha, as she is also a part of her husband’s music tech company. Anam’s experiences in the Hi-Tech Horizon made her portray the sexism prevalent in the technological field. Cyrus’ use of WAI for monetary benefits led him to face several issues. When he confronts legal issues, he quits his position as the CEO of the startup. He doesn’t stop with this. He also parts his ways with Asha. Asha is forsaken. Though she stood as his backbone, he left her in tough situations. She now realizes that nobody except her can take her to higher heights in life especially in the arena of digital culture where women are already marginalised. Her lamentation in the final chapter of the novel shows her realisation of matters around her. She comments:

I gave him that power over me. I gave him all the privilege in the world so he could turn around

and mess me up. It wasn’t your fault, Cyrus, it was mine. I bigged you up and smalled me down. I shone the light on you. I carried the water and let you drink. (Anam, 2021, The End, 292)

The novel ends in an open-ended manner. What Asha is about to do next is not revealed. It is left to readers to interpret. It is not easy for women like Asha to face hurdles like power structures within society and Bangladeshi conventions for women and succeed. Asha does it. She strived every time and attained her goals. But she is not given the limelight in this technological world. Anam’s *The Startup* is a satirical dark romantic comedy through which she brings out the marginalisation of women in the Hi-Tech horizon. The writer Anam comments on her struggles:

I wanted the story to be told from Asha’s point of view — an outsider in every way. She’s an immigrant, she’s a woman, she’s a POC — not at all like most of the people you see represented in books or films about the tech world. And even though Asha is super smart and brimming with confidence, you see how she struggles with the limitations of the workplace, how it tries continually to contain and limit her potential. These are the stories we need to hear more about. (Anam, as cited in Sreedhar, 2021)

It is not only novels that talk about the digital exclusion of women but also non-fiction. *Reset: My Fight for Inclusion and Lasting Change* by Ellen Pao is a true account of Pao’s real life experience. She talks about the gender discrimination undergone by her while she was working at Silicon Valley’s leading firm. She filed a lawsuit, which inspired many women like her who have undergone gender discrimination to file cases against it. *Power Up* by Magdalena Yesil inspires tech women to make their voices heard in difficult times. It talks about making opportunities in the tech world amidst impediments.

The *Startup Wife* which was published in 2021 shows that digital exclusion of women occurs even in today’s world, where digitalisation occurs each and every second in nook and cranny of the world. Sexism prevails with its full energy and characters like Frank and Cyrus are epitomes of it. This doesn’t mean women are completely marginalised but the pace at which women’s empowerment occurs is



slow compared to the changes in other areas of life. There is a need to empower women in the Hi-Tech horizon so that the talents of women like Asha gain momentum every day culminating in great success. Anam's position in the novel make readers realise how it is difficult for women to withstand in digital culture.

Jenny Blake's *Pivot: The Only Move That Matters Is Your Next One*, Emily Chang's *Brotopia: Breaking Up the Boys' Club of Silicon Valley*, Sallie Krawcheck's *Own It*, Kate Moore's *The Woman They Could Not Silence*, Susanne Tedrick's *Women of Color in Tech*, Pratima Rao Gluckman's *Nevertheless, She Persisted: True Stories of Women Leaders in Tech* and Danielle Newnham's *Female Innovators at Work* are the accounts of true inspiration to women working in technology. These non-fictional works complement novels like Anam's *The Startup Wife*.

The *Startup Wife* is an eye-opener that emphasises the necessity of bridging the gender gap, avoiding digital exclusion of women and employing more women in tech-oriented jobs. It is a novel that makes women in technology cautious about the power politics and gender bias that surround them. It reinforces the urgent need for inclusivity in technological domain. Asha's exclusion resonates

with many real women in the tech fields. The novel makes a strong claim that empowerment is not only about equal participation but also about more inclusive environment and transparent recognition of women's contributions.

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