

PROPOSAL FOR WORKSHOP ON “URBAN UTOPIAS: MEMORY,
RIGHTS AND SPECULATION”

*Action Heroines and Corporeal Utopia: Trans-Urban Woman’s Cinema in
Islamizing Pakistan*

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This paper examines in the light of utopian urbanism a series of Action Heroine films directed and produced by female star Shamim Ara in the era of Pakistan’s Islamization (1980’s). Walter Benjamin, thinking about urban industrial productions, saw in dreamlike entertainment such as the cinema “corporeal” images of collective desire and dissidence. Building on Benjamin’s insight, Richard Dyer argues that entertainment cinema evokes utopia as feeling and sensation rather than as a model society. My study demonstrates that in analyzing the mass production of corporeal utopia, we must account for the specificities of urban culture that foster sensorial dreams and dissident affects.

Shamim Ara’s films combine the exhilaration of urban physicality (speed, free mobility, cross-dressed womanhood) with corporeal memories of habitual family life (care-work, child-rearing) to produce heroine melodramas at odds with the socio-sensory norms of an Islamizing state. These cross-dressed Action Heroine images were born under a brutal state-led anti-obscenity campaign for policing women’s clothing and mobility in the name of Muslim patriarchal honor (*izzat*), which went hand in hand with violence on minority women (especially western-clothed Christians). Shamim Ara’s fantasies of corporeal action, while they exalt *izzat*-bearing family life (and bypass censorship), instead depict how contact with male bodies can be avoided or softened rather than suffered. Moreover, they portray family-making as a heterogeneous process, with other-parents from across borders (of religion, ethnicity, geography) coming to nurture abandoned Pakistanis.

These eclectic images of feminine and familial action stemmed from the woman director’s collaborations with small-scale, family-like entertainment industries spread across South and Southeast Asian cities. With titles such as *Miss Hong Kong* (1979) and *Miss Colombo* (1984) bearing the imprint of a trans-urban and multi-ethnic industry, Shamim Ara’s films illuminate a thick material culture of economic inter-dependence and sensorial affinity at the root of their resilient utopian vision.

