



VEIL : EPITOME OF FEMININE MODESTY OR SYMBOL OF OPPRESSION

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to study the issue of the veil as a symbol of oppression or epitome of feminine modesty with reference to 'Purdah And Other Poems' written by a renowned female poet Imtiaz Dharker. Born in Lahore, she writes about women's issues, communal conflicts, gender politics, and cultural displacement of people. She tries to show how the veil in a conservative Islamic society strictly imposed by patriarchy subjugates a woman in the name of security and she regards it as a symbol of enchainment but an attempt is made to show what in reality purdah is? A distinction is made between what is told in Islam regarding purdah and how she is mistaken to say that this orthodox religion forces women to observe purdah against their will.

Keywords : Purdah, Islam, oppression, modesty, West

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"I do not wish women to have power over men; but over themselves." Mary Wollstonecraft

There has been an astonishing flowering of Indian Women Writing in English post independence wherein they talk not only about the plight of women but also celebrate their body and freely talk about their sexuality. In order to combat the challenges of marginalization, social and artistic exclusion, the poetry of Indian women poets throws light on the suppressed desires, lust and gestational experiences. Sexuality becomes a form of political empowerment for these poets when it was so long used to enchain women. The women poets describe the changing position of women using personal confessional mode and they record their bitterness as the second sex in their writings. Poets like Mamta Kalia, Eunice De Souza, Suniti Namjoshi, Kamala Das, Imtiaz Dharker, Sunanda Mukherjee, Tara Patel and several

others talk about their mental and physical sufferings, betrayal and infidelity in marital life, physical isolation and sexual neglect, denial of sensual fulfillment, oppression, exploitation, sorority, body and beyond in their works. Sexpression helps them achieve a liberating effect against the various forms of 'structural oppression' springing from male dominance. These poets triumphantly define themselves as "the newly-born women" because they have won back their body.

Imtiaz Dharker born in 1954 is a British poet, artist and documentary filmmaker. One of her documentaries won the Silver Lotus Award for the best short film in 1980. She has won the Queen's Gold Medal for her English poetry. She was also awarded with Balraj Sahni Award by All India Artists' Association. She has published five books of poetry, *Purdah And Other Poems* (1989), *Post Cards From God* (1997), *I Speak For The Devil* (2001), *The Terrorist At My Table* (2006), and

Leaving Fingerprints (2009) in which she mainly deals with themes like home, freedom, journeys, communal conflicts and gender politics.

This paper is an attempt to study the issue of the veil as a symbol of freedom or suppression. Imtiaz Dharker regards herself as a "Scottish Muslim Calvinist" as she was born in Pakistan, brought up in Scotland and moved to India after marrying Anil Dharker, an Indian. She moved to London after the death of her first husband, married Simon Powell and presently resides there. Thus, her poetry is a confluence of three cultures. Dharker's poetry reflects her own life and she wrote poems from her bitter experiences. She deals with the issues of the social, cultural and religious significance and talks about the rights of women. Issues like women's health, their social condition in contemporary world and problems of education are highlighted in her poems. She became the spokeswoman for the oppression suffered by 'the second sex' and questions the commodification of women in this patriarchal society. She protests against Islamic principles and breaks norm by marrying non-Muslim men. She slaps the face of religious orthodoxy by rebelling against the secondary position and treatment of women. Bruce King has rightly introduced her as:

Someone as distinct in her own way as Mamta Kalia, Kamala Das and Eunice de Souza... consciously feminist, consciously political, consciously that of a multiple outsider, someone who knows her own mind rather than someone full of doubt and liberal ironies. (King, 2001 :321).

Through her first collection *Purdah And Other Poems* (1989) injustice, oppression and violence inflicted on a Muslim woman is depicted through her experiences. "Purdah I" is a poem about the various meanings the black veil holds. Traditionally, purdah signifies safety and security offered by a family but in modern times it is considered as a symbol of enchainment of women. Dharker views purdah as the symbol of patriarchal rule. She openly discards Islamic rituals and raises her voice against Islamic traditions. According to her, purdah curbs

women's freedom resulting in lack of original identity. She describes how the veil subjugates a woman in the name of security.

Of course purdah secures a woman from prying eyes providing her safety "Purdah is a kind of safety / the body finds a place to hide." (De Souza, 1997 :50) but her existence symbolizes lust and that she is all 'body' that needs to be covered. She sees purdah as a coffin for woman which gives a burial treatment to her while she is alive. She is not recognized by the world when she is under the veil and thus her identity is lost. It is a symbol of alienation from one's ownself: "The cloth fans out against the skin / Much like the earth that falls / On coffins after they put the dead men in. (De Souza, 1997 :50). It is a barrier between a woman and the world. Strange feelings are experienced by the girl under purdah. She becomes stranger for the people she knows from her childhood: "People she has known / stand up, sit down as they have always done. But they make different angles." (De Souza, 1997

Dharker's poem is a silent protest of this tradition of purdah strictly imposed by males echoing Simone de Beauvoir's statement "A woman is not born, she is made." Dharker says a woman is conditioned in this society according to the males. A girl is asked to be covered from head to toe in the black veil thereby deadening her intellectual growth. She is taught to be 'ashamed' of her body. The veil acts as a wall between the girl and the world restricting her freedom of expression. She identifies herself with other women in a collective spirit. Eunice De Souza feels that purdah prevents the self of a woman to blend with the society thereby making the self layered and repressed. Dharker depicts the image of a man in her poetry as a chauvinist, brute and portrays the female characters who live in a culturally coded world always getting instructed on how they should live. According to her, Purdah is synonymous with control, chastity, repression, submission, imprisonment and obedience to men. She writes her poems in a free form but they have an internal rhythm and

are rich in images. Her poems also shows displacement.

Through her poems, she is rebelling against the patriarchal structure and male chauvinistic society where women are denied their rights of equal treatment. According to Dharker, a girl is taught to be 'ashamed' of her body and is made dependent on males throughout her life. Childhood is spent under father's control, adolescence is bonded to the brother, youth in the service of the husband. She hates women to be dependent on the male members of the family and feels that purdah is a deliberate attempt to oppress women from demanding independence keeping them inferior. Many Urdu poets like Kishwar Naheed, Fehmida Riaz, Israr-ul-Haq Majaz have reacted adversely to the purdah system. Better known as the Keats of India, Israr-ul-Haq Majaz, raising his voice against purdah, gave the following message to women :

'Better discard thy veil it may generate mischief / Better let thy conduct secure the intended relief / Thy lowered eyes will surely guard thy modesty / The scarf on thy head may be seen as decoration/ Better transform it into a flying flag of liberation.'

Purdah system in recent times is a controversial and a widely discussed issue that has been perceived as a symbol of oppression but what is it really ? In the Holy Quran, Allah tells the believing men and women to lower their gaze and to dress modestly. He tells women to wear the veil (hijab) or cloak (abaya) in public and in the presence of unrelated men. To cover, or not to cover, is a choice for the majority of Muslim women around the world. They don't view it as a burden or a sign of oppression. In fact veil saves women from being viewed as a sexual object or being valued just for their body shape.

It may be true that women are forced to wear the veil or cloak in some culture but the Holy Quran clearly states that in religion, there is no compulsion. Veil can be a sign of inner strength or it may symbolize piety. It is an individual expression. If a women is wearing a veil it doesn't mean that she is not well-

educated or a confident member of society. She wears it out of conviction. And yes, she wears it voluntarily. Veil harms no one and if a woman decides to wear it, it shows that she is following one of the Allah's many commandments and that she loves Allah unconditionally. Allah says in the Holy Quran :

"Say to the believing men that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty... And say to the believing women that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty ; that they should not display their beauty and ornaments except what ordinarily appears thereof ; that they should draw their veils over their bosoms..." (Holy Quran 24 : 30, 31)

If wearing a veil or cloak is considered as a symbol of oppression in the west, then what about the Catholic Nuns who have been covering their heads for hundreds of years in accordance with the Bible. In the New Testament. St.Paul states that veil was a symbol of Man's authority over Woman who was created for and from him. Man on the other hand remains the image of symbol of God's glory. Women are required to cover their heads in Catholic church even today because it comes under their Canonic laws and even the church leaders says that covering the head shows woman's subjection to the man and to God. During the Tannaitic period, Jewish women used to cover head to show dignity and superiority of noble women. At that time, lower class women were not permitted to wear a veil. Jewish women continued to wear it until the nineteenth century and discarded it later . It is an irony that when women of the East didn't cover themselves like 'Victorian modest women' they were considered barbaric. Now when the ideology of the West has been changed, purdah has been interpreted as a means to degrade women. They interpret the Eastern women through their own theories.

Veil is important to safeguard modesty as stated in the Quran : "O Prophet ; tell your wives and daughters and the believing women

that they should cast their outer garments over their bodies so that they should be known and not molested." (Quran 33 : 59). Modesty simply means protection which clearly shows that Islam prescribes to wear the veil in order to protect personal integrity of women. It is obvious from the above sayings that Islam not only orders women but also instructs men to guard their modesty. Hence, women are not oppressed in the name of religion ; instead they wear it by their own choice and are proud of their identity. In fact, when European countries restricts wearing of the veil, it is understood by many women as suppression of their identity. And yes, forcing women to wear it is a form of oppression and banning someone from wearing it is another form of oppression. It may be a cultural compulsion but Islam does not allow anyone to force women to follow things unwillingly.

The real intention of purdah as described in the Holy Quran is totally different from what Dharker says. Veil does not degrade anyone and does not bring disgrace. If a woman observes purdah it may be her personal religious commitment. There are those women also who protest against western feminism's devaluation of her. In some cultures, it is patriarchy that imposes upon women to wear a veil against their wish and there is prevalence of a gender politics where males want to have control over women. If it is so, it is objectionable. It may be a propaganda according to the western media and should not be brought into the practice of occidental and oriental colours. No religion forces women to observe anything against their will and it is not a compulsion on anybody.

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