

THE SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS OF PURDAH (VEILING) IN DIFFERENT CULTURES: IN RELATION TO IMITIAZ DHARKER'S POEM PURDAH

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Purdah (veil) has been sung and celebrated age after age in poetry, films and common parlance, however, with the rise of feminism, it is now being seen in a new light with new perspectives. For most of us veiling is mostly associated with Muslim culture only, although in many parts of the world including Indian society, even today, *Purdah* is observed.

The term '*Purdah*' or '*Pardaa*' has its origin in Persian language which means 'curtain'. In ancient times, a curtain was used to conceal women from men, however, in the poem *Purdah* by Imitiaz Dharker, a spirited diasporic Muslim poet, it represents two significant requisites that is, physical segregation of the sexes as well as the requirement for women to cover their bodies and conceal their form.

In first few stanzas of the poem, we can observe how Dharker has provided an interesting perspective on the ideas of people in relation to a woman.

*"One day they said
she was old enough to learn some shame.
She found it came quite naturally.*

*Purdah is a kind of safety.
The body finds a place to hide...."*

Aforementioned lines imply that when a girl reaches her pubic age, the world starts seeing her as an object, thus she has to respond by taking recourse to *Purdah* or veil. Veil becomes a refuge for women where they feel safe from harm and disapproval. However, it is also a symbol of oppression, a sign of alienation from one's own self, as a girl is forced to do what is expected of her rather than what she feels.

Veil, today, is viewed as a flagrant violation of the basic rights, freedom and dignity of a woman; it is treated as a symbol of repression and thus, has been in constant revolt and heated controversy. But before moving to the analysis, we should take a look at the prevalence of veil in different societies due to the predominance of religious texts.

TRADITION OF VEILING

The tradition of veiling (*Purdah*) has been prevalent in the society from time immemorial, the ancient Greek, Roman, Byzantine and Persian societies all engaged in the practice of veiling. Also, its practice has been prominent in different forms in different religions including Judaism, Christianity, Islamism and Hinduism.

In Christianity, it is customary for women to cover their head in church, whereas it is seen as a sign of respect if a man removes his hat. This practice is based on the 1 Corinthians 11:4-16, where St Paul writes:

“Any man who prays or prophesies with his head covered brings shame upon his head. But any woman who prays or prophesies with her head unveiled brings shame upon her head, for it is one and the same thing as if she had had her head shaved. For if a woman does not have her head veiled, she may as well have her hair cut off. But if it is shameful for a woman to have her hair cut off or her head shaved, then she should wear a veil. A man, on the other hand, should not cover his head, because he is the image and glory of God, but woman is the glory of man. For man did not come from woman, but woman from man; nor was man created for woman, but woman for man; for this reason a woman should have a sign of authority on her head, because of the angels.”

This tradition of head covering still continues in conservative Catholic communities, as well as Anabaptists such as the Amish and some Mennonite Christians. Also, a veil over the hair and body (except the face) in form of headdress and a long robe is still adorned by nuns or religious sisters, thus when a woman becomes a nun, it is said “to take the veil”.

In Islamic tradition, Muslim women wear a variety of headdresses in accordance with hijab i.e. the principle of dressing modestly or at times referred to as veils. The principle aim of the veil is to cover the parts of the body that are considered private. Many of these garments cover the hair, ears and throat, but not the face. Other kinds of veil such as the burqa and niqab also cover the face leaving a slit or hole for the eyes. Moreover, the Afghan burqa is a type of garment that covers the entire body, obscuring the face completely, leaving only a grille or netting over the eyes to allow the wearer to see. Another, type of veil boshiya is worn over as a headscarf, it is made of a sheer fabric and covers the entire face so that the wearer is able to see through it. Historians suggest that the practice of veiling, once uncommon among the Arab tribes, originated in the Byzantine Empire and then spread with the rise of Islam. Veil is associated with chastity and dignity of a woman and the Holy Quran states that “...it is mandatory for a Muslim woman

as ordained by the God to cover herself in front of strangers and distant relatives with veil or hijab; this includes the hair, arms, bosom, feet and other parts of the body.”

In Judaism, veiling is biblical requirement for a modest woman. As in Jewish communities a woman's loose hair are a symbol of sensuousness, thus wearing a headdress is important. Moreover, according to Torah (five books of the five Moses, also called the Hebrew Bible), “*the priest uncovers or unbraids the accused woman's hair as a part of humiliation*”, if a woman is accused of adultery. Even in Hindu society, the practice of veiling (*ghoonghat*) can be traced back to Vedic period. The idea of seclusion and veiling was a mark of the woman's complete loyalty towards their husband.

SIGNIFICANCE AND IMPACT OF VEILING - SOCIALLY, CULTURALLY AND ECONOMICALLY

The earliest known recorded reference to veiling, comes back from the Assyrian text in 13th century B.C. that describes the practice of veiling only reserved for the aristocratic women, whereas it was forbidden for women from lower social strata and prostitutes. These women, if caught in head coverings, were punished. In ancient societies, such as the Greek, Roman, Byzantine and Persian (from where the Abrahamic religions emerged), veiling was a marker of social rank and was reserved only for the rich and the upper-class women.

In early Christian and Jewish traditions, the use of veil was a measure of piety. It denoted a woman's submission to a man. In Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism and Sikhism although facial veiling is not sanctioned, the upper strata of the society advocated the use of veil for married woman, also known as *ghoonghat*, as it symbolized the woman's passing from the protection of her parent's household to her husband. Also, with the invasion of Moghul rulers Hindu culture observed a growth in the practice of veiling. Thus, Satish Chandra writes, “*the growth of Purdah has been attributed to the fear of the Hindu women being captured by the invaders. In the age of violence, women were liable to be treated as prizes of war.*”

Moreover, in every religion be it Christianity, Islamism, Judaism or Hinduism, there is one thing in common, that is, bridal veils. In the ancient wedding ritual, the lifting of the veil was a symbol of the groom taking possession of his wife, while in the 19th century, these veils came to symbolize the virginity and modesty of the bride. This tradition of a veiled bride's face even continues today, where the veil is lifted when ceremony finishes and the marriage is to be consummated.

Also, in the pre-Islamic Arab, the veil of a woman was symbol of her class and thus protected her from being harassed, raped or even killed. A veiled woman had the protection of tribe, thus nothing wrong could be done to her, even by her husband.

It is true, that veil was necessary in the beginning of some cultures, as some countries were torn by the turmoil and social strife, and it ensured the safety of women. However, we can also not

completely deny the fact that veil was also a tool used by men to control women. The ‘Men of God’ have used religion to validate this tool to suppress women, to subordinate her and to alienate her from her own identity. Veil not only confines a woman’s body, but also her spirit, her mind, her individual agency. This oppression articulated deep down in the psyche of the woman is beautifully portrayed in Dharker’s poetry, when she writes –

*“Purdah is a kind of safety.
The body finds a place to hide.
The cloth fans out against the skin
much like the earth that falls
on coffins after they put the dead men in.”*

VEIL - A SYMBOL OF OPPRESSION OR EMPOWERMENT IN THE CONTEMPORARY WORLD?

In the contemporary world, many view veil as a symbol of oppression. Imtiaz Dharker’s collection of poetry ‘**Purdah**’ is one such example and one cannot fail to notice her subtle artistry in exposing the *Purdah* system, which she witnessed and experienced during her growing years. This system of veiling is not only the part of Islamic societies, but also of many different societies around the globe, including the Christian, the Judaist and the Hindu. One thing coherent in all these societies is the suppression of women through various ways and the most common is the imposition of the practice of veiling.

In the poem ‘*Purdah*’, our attention is brought towards the working of the society where veil is imposed on a girl who is coming-of-age. It is a turning point in a girl’s life as she is suddenly reminded of her sexuality and is made conscious of her sexual growth. This creates a certain kind of awkwardness, as people have started looking at her in a different way.

*“But they make different angles
in the light, their eyes aslant,
a little sly.*

*...carefully carrying what we do not own:
between the thighs, a sense of sin.”*

Through these lines we are reminded of the way society objectifies a woman. A woman is only seen as an object to gratify the sexual needs of the man, she is nothing less than a child-bearing machine and her only aim in life should be to keep her family satisfied. She has no identity of her own, even her sexuality is not her own. It belongs to the man she marries; he owns her body as he is the master. Moreover, the last line also gives us the picture of the conservative society that is always cautious and conscious and must teach the woman some manners, decorum and dignity which a woman in *Purdah* must maintain.

However, many women also see ‘veiling’ as an act of empowerment. They feel that veil isn’t a loss of individual identity rather it is the gain of one homogenous conscious identity which all the women share. This brings out the feeling of solidarity and sisterhood. Also, for many women wearing veil is a representation of their honour, femininity, supremacy, and sometimes comfort. Thus, when Reza Shah Pahlavi passed a royal decree on January 7, 1936 to ban the veil in an effort to “modernize” Iran, the strict enforcement caused much uproar and distress among various communities. Many women, along with their husbands, opposed the royal decree so strongly that they even refused to leave their houses for months till the ban was lifted, while some others went out into the streets in full cover as sign of protest. This led to “renewed interest in the veil”, as now even the more liberal and non-traditional woman of middle and upper classes took up the scarf and observance of *Hejab*.

But again on March 8, 1979, Iran witnessed a passionate protest, as more than 100,000 women gathered on the streets against the imposition of compulsory *hejab* by Ayatollah Khomeini. Women felt that Khomeini severely curtailed their rights by imposing *hejab* on them.

Thus, the extremities of the situation in Iran brought to light that practice of veiling should not be measured in the binary of empowerment or oppression, as it can act as both. For some women, veil acts as an empowering garment; it gives them the strength, the freedom, the power to be whoever they want to be without revealing their identity. While for others, veil acts as a barrier between their independence and their personal expression.

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