Purdah as a Tool of Marginalisation: A Reading of Imtiaz Dharker’s Purdah Poems

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Abstract

Marginalization has been an often talked of term and it draws out various implications in almost all the walks of life. The world has been divided into binaries and one side of these binaries is often privileged over the ‘other’. Male/female dichotomy is one such instance where the world of male has been privileged over the females. This distances the women from the center and makes them a commodity. When the world starts seeing a girl as an object, she ought to respond by taking recourse to ‘purdah’. The ‘purdah’ also stands as a metaphor for the way women seek refuge and retreat into shells to be safe from harm and disapproval. The ‘purdah’ also stands as an alienation from one's own self, where a girl is forced to do what is expected of her rather than what she feels. The social pressure and stress makes one lose a sense of being true to oneself. Imtiaz Dharker’s poetry dwells in the realm of the processes of fortifying females from the male gaze and she argues that these creatures do need the unfiltered rays of the sun. They too want an uncovered identity. Their souls in their bodies wrapped in ‘purdah’ are like a corpse put in the coffin and buried deep down the earth. This paper tries to unfold various strands of the marginalization process with women at its center in the poetic corpus of Imtiaz Dharker.

Keywords: Marginalisation, Purdah, Alienation, Identity.

Marginalization has been an often talked of term drawing out various implications in almost all the walks of life. The world has been divided into binaries and one side of these binaries is often privileged over the ‘other’. The male/female dichotomy is one such instance where the world of male has been privileged over the females. This distances the women from the center and makes them a commodity, which is often marginalised. Purdah is a religious and social institution of female seclusion in [Muslim-majority countries](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Muslim_world) and South Asian countries. The [Arabic](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arabic) equivalent of purdah is [hijab](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hijab). The term purdah is predominantly used in South Asia. It has visual, spatial, and ethical dimensions. It refers to three main components:

1. Veiling of women,
2. Segregation of sexes, and
3. A set of norms and attitudes that sets boundaries for Muslim women’s moral conduct.

Purdah, the system of female seclusion, is a salient feature of Islam as a religion. It has visual, spatial and ethical dimensions. It is both a garment, concealing the Muslim woman from sight, as well as an ideology which demarcates the boundaries of the Muslim woman's space and defines her sexual morality. Originally instituted for the protection of the Muslim woman, the purdah has gradually degraded to an instrument of control and female subjugation and a system of total exclusion of the woman from public life. The institution of purdah has attracted the attention of sociologists as well as creative writers right from the period of colonial rule down to the present day. This paper proposes to examine the treatment of purdah in select subcontinental narratives either written in English or appearing in translation. The multiple facets of the purdah are analyzed in the light of the works written by Attia Hosain, Ismat Chughtai and Nadeem Aslam. The overt manifestations of the purdah and its metaphorical and symbolic ramifications are analyzed in the texts of these writers. This paper concludes that the writers dwell more on the restrictive and repressive aspects of purdah than on its protective aspects

There are two pespectives on the Islamic tradition of purdah in fictional narratives, one from the Indian side of the subcontinent and the other, the Pakistani. For the outside observer, the burqa-clad woman holds an exotic fascination, an irresistible appeal. For the woman within, it can be a stifling imposition, restricting her social participation and reducing her to a mere object of sex. More than a garment concealing the Muslim woman from sight, the purdah is an ideology which demarcates the boundaries of the Muslim woman's space and defines her sexual morality.

This social institution has figured in fictional narratives produced in the subcontinent right from colonial times down to the present. This paper proposes to examine the treatment of purdah in select fictional narratives produced in the Indo-Pakistani subcontinent. The paper concentrates more on the women writers because purdah is a societally enforced system that secludes the woman, and hence, becomes an intimate experience for the women writers. However, a male-authored narrative is also analyzed as a study of purdah would be partial and prejudiced without an examination of the male perspective.

The culture of Purdah varies broadly according to religions, region, nationality, cultures, and socioeconomic classes. Some scholars such as…. argue that purdah was initially designed to protect women from being harassed, but later these practices became a way to justify efforts to subjugate women and limit their mobility and freedom. However, contrary to the above mentioned viewpoint, some scholars like….. believe that these practices were always in place as local custom, but were later adopted by religious rhetoric to control female behavior. Purdah is often criticized as oppression of women by limiting female autonomy, freedom of movement, and access to resources such as education, employment, and political participation. Purdah can be seen as a form of male domination in the public sphere, and an eclipse to a Muslim woman’s identity and individuality. According to scholars such as Elizabeth White, “purdah is an accommodation to and a means of perpetuating the perceived differences between the sexes: the male being self-reliant and aggressive, the female weak, irresponsible, and in need of protection”(). In her book entitled Nine Parts of Desire:  The Hidden World of Islamic Women, Geraldine Brooks writes “in both cases [of spatial separation and veiling], women are expected to sacrifice their comfort and freedom to service the requirements of male sexuality: either to repress or to stimulate the male sex urge”(). When purdah is institutionalized into laws, it limits opportunity, autonomy, and [agency](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Agency) in both private and public life.

Being the traveller of traditions Imtiaz Dharker has got the essence of being veiled woman in a country like Pakistan(where she was born) and a free woman in Scotland(where she was brought up). So she stood for the expression of feminine self and sexuality in a world where these feeble individuals strive in a prison made of clothes, to be free. She explores difficult facets of Muslim woman’s identity through her poetry. Her poetry surpasses the egocentric issues of rootedness, belongingness,marginalisation and essentialises all women through pain and suffering. My attempt through this paper will be to deal with various aspects of a Muslim woman’s life where she experiences injustices oppression violence engineered through the culture of Purdah.

According to Oxford English dictionary, purdah is the custom found in some Muslim and Hindu cultures of women not allowing their faces to be seen by male strangers, either by staying in a special part of house or by wearing a covering over their faces. The poems Purdah I and II are “about being a woman and not just a Muslim woman”(). The theme of purdah is explored not just in terms of the burqua worn by Muslim women, but more broadly as the elaborate codes of seclusion and feminine modesty used to protect and control women’s lives across the religious divide. Dharker does not imply any exclusive culture specificity to female subordination in practices, though linguistically she uses the Muslim equivalent of subordination – i.e. the purdah.

The institution of purdah has two forms and that is, the visible one which is manifest in seclusion, dress and segregation of the sexes and the invisible one which is prevalent in the underlying attitudes of the society. The purdah culture has a reflective connection between the public policy and women’s way of life.

Issue of gaze is central to Imtiaz Dharker’s poem and the poetess approaches this gaze from the viewpoint of the woman and from the position of those who objectify and situate her in that position accordingly. She projects her expression of repression of female sexuality by using the instrument of shame. Dharker belongs to the generation of post-independence women poets who have gone out to prove that Indian English poetry not only matches the best anywhere worldwide, but is also here to stay. In her writings, Dharker has given vent to the anguish, agony, frustrations, humour, observations and reflections, which are faced by the muslim women, without any trace of pretension or bias. The pain and poignancy endured in suffocation and the suppression suffered have found a justifiable outlet through her creative compositions.

*Purdah I* provides an interesting perspective on the ideas of people in general and how they relate to a woman specifically

One day they said   
she was old enough to learn some shame.  
She found it came quite naturally. (Dharker 14)

The above lines imply that when the girl starts getting herself converted into a woman, the world’s gaze changes entirely towards her, and hence she is ought to respond to this gaze by taking recourse to purdah. The purdah stands as a metaphor for the way women seek refuge and retreat into shells to be safe from harm and disapproval, it stands as an alienation from one’s own self, where a girl is forced to do what is expected of her rather than what she feels.

Women, from a very early age, are taught about gender and the shame associated with it and Dharker’s views relates from these early teachings. In the beginning, she uses the purdah and considers it as something distinct or separate from her, but with the passage of time she becomes accustomed to it and it comes to be associated with her perception of herself and the outside world. Purdah can be considered as windows shuttered upon a private world and like a traveller she moves between cultures exploring the dilemmas of negotiation among countries, lovers and children.

Once the girl is capable of distancing her personality from her physical state, realisation dawns on her and she begins to see how completely she is dependent on the patriarchal structures that govern social norms and conventions. The purdah restricts a girl from exercising her freedom as an individual, it not only restricts a girl’s vision of the world but it restricts her experience of life altogether, creating such a problem for girl that she is eternally engaged in the process of self-examination, trying to figure out her own situation and the world around her.

Apart from the purdah which is exercised socially, there is also a mental purdah set by stream of customs and traditions. Religious and ethnic history also sets innumerable barricades and hurdles in the way of their mental progress. It can very well be said that it is not only the culture and religion that set up mental barricades but it is also love, marriage and relationships, motherhood, maturity and the process of ageing which drowns a woman into submission thereby restricting her within the confines of the aforesaid.

Dharker’s poetry has been described by Bruce King as “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” (321). In the Muslim culture the practice of purdah has its focus on the seclusion of girls who have reached puberty whether they are married or not.

The poem entitled *Purdah* uses burqua as a metaphor for the way women experience themselves and their surroundings and then comments on it in an ironic, humorous, angry and lastly sad manner. The poetess believes that Islamic culture uses shame not only in order to repress women’s sexuality but also as a barrier against women’s spiritual and emotional independence, it leads women to falseness, ambiguity, distrust and isolation. Purdah in the opinion of Dharker seems to be a kind of safety, that fans out against the skin much like the earth that falls on coffins, “while doors keep opening inward and again inward”(15). These doors according to the poetess lead to prisons for victims whose only crime consists in being a woman. As part of purdah, the burqua exercises pressure and dictatorial control over many aspects of women’s lives, thereby leading to an alienation from her own self.

In the pre-independence India, discrimination against the natives encouraged the subjugation of women; on the other hand the exploitation by the colonial masters doubly reinforced the subordination suffered by women under patriarchy. Colonialism had its historical demise, but patriarchy seems firmly entrenched in the society. Women writers like Dharker continue to articulate their resistance to patriarchy, finding common cause in the struggle for self –representation by all minorities that suffer marginalisation and discrimination. If male discourse has dwelt on the mystique of the veil, the inner courtyards, the antharpurs and zenanas, female discourse has attempted to subvert these moves by tearing apart the purdahs and demolishing the architectural enclosures of a ‘misogynist’ patriarchy. Dharker’s poetry has the moral force of the marginalised as it strives to create spaces for itself.

The poetry of Dharker has travelled an interesting path-from the trauma of cultural exile and alienation to a celebration of unsettlement as settlement; from an anguished indictment of purdah where “the body finds a place to hide” (Dharker 14) to a defiant removal of the “black veil of faith / that made me faithless to myself”() and the “lacy things / that feed dictator dreams”().

Dharker’s poems have traced an interesting path ranging from the exile and alienation to a celebration of unsettlement as settlement. They depict an agonized denunciation of the whole form of purdah as practiced in specific culture. Taking a start from the following lines:

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 dead men in.(Dharker 14)

Dharker’s poetry takes a stance which shows the insolent elimination of the veil, which is again observed in another writing of the poetess,

I’m taking of this veil,

this black veil of a faith

that made me faithless

to myself,

that tied my mouth,

gave my god a devil’s face,

and muffled my own voice. (8-14)

The purdah poems explore a somewhat interior politics by probing the multiple resonances of the veil. *Purdah I* takes its setting from the specifics of Muslim culture, “for the way women retreat into shells to be safe from disapproval and harm, it is a condition of the mind under social pressure and stress where eventually one loses a sense of being true to oneself.” (King 321)

The onset of puberty signifies the coming into the picture of the traditional male politico-religious hierarchy to put her in her place, within the purdah. It is an alienation from one’s own self, a doing of what is expected rather that what one feels. And this, in the view of the potess Imtiaz Dharker, results from the shame women are taught early about their gender and sexuality. The following stanza which speaks of the grave-like security of purdah, sounds like an assertion of the speaker’s own experience.

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 dead men in.(Dharker 14)

The poem Purdah not only talks about the marginalised Muslim women but also talks about female subject and relates to the way she is seen in public. Dharker tries engaging in the process of self-examination, thereby making her subject to make sense of her situation and the world around her. The work starts basically with a call for mutual respect. Throughout Dharker’s work she is concerned with the prevalent social injustice and tries removing it by subtle and sensitive awareness. She uses purdah to express the idea of seclusion of women from public life, her work expresses repression of female sexuality by using the instrument of shame. Purdah poems deal with various aspects of a Muslim woman’s life where she experiences injustice oppression violence engineered through the culture of purdah.

Throughout her corpus Dharker explores all the presumptions about subjectivity and body that need to be scrutinized and challenged so as to conjecture the bodily roots of female subjectivity free from the fetters of the demonic male waiting to devour her sexually. Dharker extends the notion of the “female” body as the stuff of inscription of patriarchal social norms, practices, and values to the poignant portrayal of veiling as experienced by women themselves and validates the positioning of Muslim women’s bodies within literary and artistic representations. The poetess brings a different perspective to the taken for granted presumption about the possibility of the inscription of female bodies through various practices of adornment and clothing, and so on, when we recognise the cruelty and primitiveness of veiling inflicted by men to control women’s bodies and desire. Erecting a barrier between the body of the veiled woman and the male gaze, the opaque, all-encompassing veil seems to place woman’s body out of the reach of male gaze and desire. Surely, the veiled woman is already othered in her own culture, gendered in and by a particular form of dressing, but she is also other to the dominant male subjects of her culture.

In *Purdah II*, the poetess indirectly criticizes several aspects of Muslim society. The setting of the poem is England. The poem brings the issues relating to Muslim women living in England. The call of “Allah-u-Akbar” in the beginning of the poem is as reassuring as the sound of a coin,providing a sense of security and belonging, even though it evokes a routine response. In the following stanzas of the poem, the poetess censures the traditional kind of education received by Muslim girls which focuses on repeating the words of Quran mechanically, rather than giving them professional or worldly knowledge. Dharker, further expresses her thought by telling the readers, that the girl has no freedom to have a relationship of her “choice”, a traditional marriage is already kept in store of her as part of her life’s destiny. The nature of this traditional marriage is suggested through the image of red fabric:

I see you quite different in my head,

not dressed in this cold blue.

I see your mother bringing you

a stretch of brilliant fabric, red.

Yes, crimson red, patterned through

with golden thread.(Dharker 17)

Through these lines Dharker expresses the existential dilemma of the Muslim women in Britain. She presents how even a revolt against the prevalent system is at times ineffectual.

Indian women for ages have been in the whirlpool of pain and suffering. William Bentick, Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Vidyasagar and others have contributed immensely for the upliftment and restoration of their rights. The orthodox Indian society is yet to ‘free’ the Indian woman fully from its tentacles. However there has been a change in contemporary times, the woman living in contemporary world is not someone, identical to a mirror, which magnifies the image of man. This revolutionary spirit is a common trait among all the contemporary women writers in Indian writing in English.

The Patriarchal society expects the woman to play the second fiddle. In fact her very ‘identity’ is at stake. This identity, as I.G. Ahmed asserts, can never be tethered to her ‘name’ that, like her roles, was given to her by ‘somebody else’, and that too, for mere ‘ convenience’. In her personal life she tries casting off her personal and speaks for the inclusive gender identity.

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