

Lapis Lazuli

An International Literary Journal

ISSN 2249-4529

www.pintersociety.com

GENERAL SECTION VOL: 9, No.: 1, SPRING 2019

UGC APPROVED (Sr. No.41623)

BLIND PEER REVIEWED

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Free Souls Under The Veil: Critical responses to Salman Rushdie, Attia Hosain, Naguib Mahfouz and Sharmila Seyyid's novels

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Abstract:

Gender construction refers to a complex set of social process that determines the set of values, behaviour pattern and norms of conduct that govern roles and responsibilities of women and men, as also their interrelations. Gender construction is culture specific and therefore varies in different societies. The word 'purdah' has two related but distinct meanings: one is physical in the sense of women wearing a veil or burqa to cover their face from public view, the other is more complex and attitudinal, in the sense of a social norm, whereby women live in seclusion, both from men and from the sphere of civic and public action. One can be in 'purdah' in both ways. This paper will study a few novels which talk about purdah system and will also highlight their depiction of subjugation of women in Islamic society: Attia Hosain's '*Sunlight on a broken column*', Salman Rushdie's '*Shame*', '*Midnight's Children*', Naguib Mahfouz's '*Palace walk*', and Sharmila Seyyid's '*Ummath*'. Sri Lankan writer Sharmila Seyyid in her novel '*Ummath*' not only exposes the injustices meted out by Tamil nationalist to Tamil speaking Muslims in Sri Lanka, but also critiques the Talibanisation of the Muslim community in eastern Sri Lanka.

Keywords:

purdah system, seclusion, subjugation, injustice, veil, Islamic culture

Historically, it appears that purdah is the sense of wearing a veil that hides a women's face. This purdah system was introduced in Indian Society only after the advent of the Muslim empire. (Altetkar: 1992). Ancient Hindu texts do not mention any 'purdah', the usual references are only to women's own quarters, their own private domain which was known as 'antahpuram'. Even in the hymns of the Rig Veda we find that women moved freely "in the inner chambers and the courtyard of a house" (Chapter VIII "Liberty"). In Classical drama, women used to wear costumes and their appearance were comparable to the men. Even old sculptures of India prove that women did not wear veil or were under 'purdah'. The sculptures of Sanchi (2nd Century BC) show that women did not wear veils. Similarly, in the frescos of Ajanta and Ellora (600-800 AD) we get the same evidence. In early travelogues by travellers like Yuan Chuang (7th Century AD) and Abu Zaid (10th Century AD), we do not record anything about purdah. Altetkar mentions that only women in the upper echelons were said to wear ornamental veils during Pre-Muslim era. In painting, sculptures and literature the high born men wore almost as much jewellery as high born women. Women were often set amidst

public scenes such as the market place. So, it is understandable that only after the advent of Muslims, Hindu women took to purdah or ghonghat. Only to protect themselves from the gaze and action of these strangers, they had to hide their face behind the veils and also were forced to live the life of seclusion in 'zenanas'.

Islam has mostly been imagined as a peculiar religion predisposed to maltreat the female sex. No other religion has so shamelessly been the target of demonization for its gender practices and no religion has so passionately and boldly barricaded itself against outside pressure. Since ages whosoever came in contact with Islamic culture, gendered cultural practice and legal tradition had always been described in 'Traveller's tales', diplomatic reports and in the diaries of traders, physicians, teachers and others Europeans recruited by various middle Eastern states. It is only after the colonial encounter we get to know about 'local' traditions report on cultural practises hostile to women. The European literary and scholarly report gives a sneering and condemnatory account of the sexual and moral behaviour of Muslim Men. Judy Mabro observes how strongly and consistently the description of Middle Eastern People and societies were implicated by the images of the 'Arabian Nights' (Mabro: 1996:28). In another study of European travel Lisa Lowe has uncovered the sexual fantasies of male travellers (Lowe: 1999:76). In the eyes of the European male viewers, the Muslim women, were 'far more oriental than the men'. 'La femme Orientale', for example was represented in Gustave Flaubert's letters as 'masculine fantasy of pure erotic service in the industrialized age of French imperialism'. 'La femme Orientale' generated sexual pleasure, but was 'impassive, under demanding and insensate herself, her oriental mystery never failed to charm, her resources never exhausted' (Lowe: 1991:76). Scophenhauer considered woman to be 'weaker in her power of reasoning, narrow in her vision, intellectually short sighted, with no sense of justice and inclination to extravagant, to a length that borders madness'. However Scophenhauer suggested that it fitted women 'to amuse man in his hours of recreation and in case of need, to console him, when he is borne down by the weight of his cares' (Osbourne: 1979: 213-214).

Islam was condemned for its treatment towards women, especially for female enslavement like the harem, the veil and polygamy; their non personal status and sexual double standards. This 'colonial feminism' as Leila Ahmed has remarked was to legitimize Europe's 'civilizing mission'. These colonial backdrops and criticism towards Muslim women were used as a kind of exploitation by the Western men. Instead she was to be liberated from her own ignorance and her culture's cruelty. She was in fact used as a stick with which the West could beat the East (L. Ahmed: 1992:51-153).

The fear of a women's seductive power is not unique to Islam only. In Jewish scriptural and oral (Talmu) tradition practiced by the minority, 'Hasidics' women seem to have aggressive and insatiable sexual drive to the extent that men are only willing victims of women's enticement. Likewise, the Christian father saw women at fault for causing male sexual arousal. In fact, St. Paul believed that women's seductive powers were so

great that they caused even angels to sin. This statement of over sexual morality in Western Civilization is quite well known. In the west, the sexual relationship outside marriage is not a legal offence unless it is aggravated by circumstances such as lack of consent or rape or when it is involved with an underage person. Whereas Islamic law by contrast holds the view that any sexual relationship is a crime unless it is between husband and wife. This distinction shows that the Islam has got a more paralysing impact on the lives of women. Religious-moral instruction and standards constitute the basis of women's legal rights and personal status. In the case of Judaism, the experience of Jewishness for women, one would think has been and is still different depending onto which domination (ultraorthodox, conservative and reform) they belong or in which part of the world they live, as well as on the class status of makers Jewish Community. Studying the occurrence and declination of purdah in India- English literature is not as controversial as the other topics but it too needs an understanding of historical cultural bases in addition to skills of literary analysis. This paper will study a few novels which talk about purdah system and will also highlight their depiction of subjugation of women in Islamic society: Attia Hosain's '*Sunlight on a broken column*', Salman Rushdie's '*Shame*', and '*Midnight's Children*', Naguib Mahfouz's '*Palace walk*', and Sharmila Seyyid's '*Ummath*'.

Sri Lankan writer Sharmila Seyyid in her novel '*Ummath*' not only exposes the injustices meted out by Tamil nationalists to Tamil speaking Muslims in Sri Lanka, but also critiques the Talibanisation of the Muslim community in Eastern Sri Lanka. Ms. Seyyid writes, "Question about covering a women's face...her whole body and the clothes is shrouded over by force." She states that the fundamentalists who say that they are the guardians of the society, have set up their own illegal 'panchayats', making it impossible to give actuality to the dignity and rights of women that the Holy book, The Koran has taught us. The practise of wearing a head dress and facial veil is an Arab Custom and was brought to other countries as part of commercial venture. Our dominant men have been successful in convincing women that these commercial products are a part of the Islamic culture and tradition. Islamic women therefore have started wearing them as symbol of their identity and also because they fear that refusing to do so would stigmatise them as unchaste, anti-Islamic and even brand them as prostitutes. Sri Lankan writer Sharmila Seyyid is the latest victim of Islamic fundamentalism working across border. First exiled from her country, she has now been 'raped' and 'killed' online. Muslim fundamentalist group from Tamil Nadu, Sri Lanka and West Asia began organised attack on Ms. Seyyid. Her name is being defamed and linked with scandals. These authors in their novels introduce their own perspective about 'purdah culture' and also how purdah is a social custom that has outlived its day.

Naguib Mahfouz's '*Palace walk*' set in Cairo provides this contrast through narrative strategies that are weighted, perhaps unintentionally towards the priorities of purdah culture. Amina married at fourteen, has never moved beyond the narrow confines of her house and routine and had never been outside without her husband's knowledge

and permission. In her forties, with five grown children, she yields to a lifelong temptation that is totally religious- "A visit to the shrine of Al Husayn is something my heart has wished for all my life... but... your father?" Her son assures her to help her when his father is away. He said "As an extra precaution you can borrow Unni Hanafi's wrap, so anyone who sees you leaving the house or returning will think you are a visitor." (Mahfouz: 165) As she crossed the threshold of the outer door and entered the street, she experienced a moment of panic. Her mouth felt dry ...she had an oppressive feeling of doing something wrong. Later, "with joy singing in her breast, she felt that her body was dissolving into tenderness, affection and love and she was being transformed into a spirit fluttering in the sky, radiant with the glow of prophetic inspiration." But disaster strikes, she falls and fractures her bone. Back home, despite her children's elaborate plan to keep it secret from their father, she confesses to him and begs for forgiveness, her husband, so magnanimously, allows her to stay at home until her shoulder heals and then banishes her. Mahfouz shows many instances of how confining a life in 'purdah' is, in the final analysis he seems to uphold the tradition of masculine control by not voicing or even implying protest. In contrast to Mahfouz, Rushdie's Aadam Aziz directly orders his wife Nassem in *'Midnight's Children'* to come out of burqa and this leads to her coming out of purdah in the larger sense: because of a man's initiative a woman grows into her full potential. Rushdie in his novel *'Shame'* shows his awareness about how the system subjugates women. He says in *Shame*, "...the women seem to have taken over, they marched in from the peripheries of the story to demand the inclusion of their own tragedies, histories, and comedies...to see my 'male' plot refracted, so to speak, through the prisms of its reverse and 'female' side." (173) Rushdie's statement is that society ought not to condemn 'purdah' not only because it oppresses women but because such oppression unleashes a violence that will destroy all of society. As he says in *'Shame'* - "Humiliate people for long enough and a wildness bursts out of them." (117) In *'Shame'* all the main women characters, Bilquis, Shakil's sister, Arjumand, Naveed, Sufiya, are strong but all of them end up scarred.

Attia Hosain's *'Sunlight on a broken column'* begins thus, "The day my aunt Abida moved-from the 'zenana' into the guest-room off the corridor that led to men's wing of the house..." Later in this novel, Laila quietly moves out of the 'zenana' and into the arms of love; she gets this strength because of her father's wishes and aunt's efforts have educated her to become an individual who can absorb the best from the world around her. Hosain's novel is the most artistic in terms of moulding social commentary into the narrative. It is a sensitive portrayal of the privileged class and its pangs of extinction. In a period of twenty years, as Laila's fortunes change, India too moves from colonialism to independence, losing the old feudal order, its property, privileges and poise, giving room to the exertion, strain, frustration and toil of the post-independence era. The book is not so much a "case" against 'Purdah' a well-shaped, genuinely felt reconstruction of life in such conditions, its collisions with the modern World, and the astonishingly tough-minded women it breeds. Hosain writes from a Muslim point of view about the intense life of the Muslim family. Her study of Laila is very firm, clear, and sympathetic, and exhibits the sort of dilemma which the

overwhelming claustrophobic life of the family in India tends to bring about—the character with a bias to independence and solitariness who becomes almost a solipsist in reaction to the smothering family. Laila subtly comments upon her shift from a strictly gender segregated family to another strident patriarchal niche. Aunt Saira was Uncle Hamid's echo, tall and handsome, dominated by him, aggressive with others. He had groomed her by a succession of English 'lady-companions'. Before she was married, she had lived strictly in purdah, in an orthodox, middle class household. Sometimes her smart saris, discreet make up, waved hair, cigarette-holder and high-heeled shoes seemed to me like fancy dress. (p.87) She discards the purdah not as her own conscious choice; rather she comes out of purdah, only to conform to 'new' patriarchal roles. Like Zahra, she is physically out of purdah, but her intellectual incarceration is evident in her conformist attitude. She is the stereotypical 'new' woman, embodying Eastern and Western culture. Laila narrates that Saira's westernization was much to the dismay of Baba Jan, "Baba Jan had never been able to forgive his son for opting a Western way of living, bringing his wife out of purdah, neglecting the religious education of his sons and doing all this openly and proudly." (p.87) Saira's freedom from strict purdah cannot be interpreted as an expression of Hamid's reformist ideas; instead Hamid merely modified the patriarchal views of Baba Jan according to the demands of time. Saira's modernity is a mere simulacrum when it comes to the issue of Laila's marriage. First she tries to arrange Laila's marriage to a profligate ruler of an estate and later to one of her own sons in order to keep the property undivided. She is prejudiced about Ameer regarding his pedigree and (90) sternly opposes Laila's marriage to him. If she sulkily approves Laila's marriage, it is only to save the family's reputation. In the last part, after her husband's death, she gives up 'modernity' and returns to the traditional way of life. Her reverting to traditions is also ordained by the patriarchy, as in a strict patriarchal system, a widow must refrain from the pursuit of luxury and pleasure. Aunt Abida is portrayed as adherent to old values. She embodies the high culture of Lucknow, as she is well versed in Urdu and Persian poetry. The readers are informed that she remains a spinster because of Baba Jan's emphasis on pedigree. He "...found no one good enough for her; and refused one good proposal after another." (22) At the inception of the novel, her peripheral status is analogous to the status of the family servant Karam Ali, as Baba Jan, despite their strict sense of duty reprimands both of them for their alleged dereliction of duty towards him. After Baba Jan's death, Hamid hurriedly arranges her marriage to an old widower. Laila observes more strident marginalization of Aunt Abida during her visit to Abida's in-laws' house. Notwithstanding the hostile atmosphere and stereotypical jealousies of the women at Abida's in-laws' house, Abida sacrifices her individuality for 'duty'. She exhorts Laila, "You must learn that your 'self' is of little importance. It is only through service to others that you can fulfil your duty." (252) Despite her love for Laila, she adamantly refutes Laila's desire to marry Ameer. She takes it as Laila's defiance and disobedience: "You have been defiant and disobedient. You have put yourself above your duty to your family."[...] "You have let your family's name be bandied about

scandal (91) mongers and gossips. You have soiled its honour on their vulgar tongues.” (312) Abida’s ‘way of thinking’ was altogether different from Laila’s, as Abida’s strong sense of duty and compliance to the patriarchal norms sets her apart from Laila. To her dismay, she considers Laila’s love for Ameer merely as the assertion of her sexual instinct. Laila cannot reconcile with Abida, as she has rejected patriarchal hegemony in which Abida participates. Jasbir Jain considers Abida a remarkable woman, with a sense of justice and balance. (36) Her virtues are crushed when she acts insensitively towards the tenants, in compliance with the feudal rules. Sita’s character ostensibly appears non-conformist, as she blatantly asserts her femininity in the company of men, throwing all caution to the winds. However, at times, she is also subjected to patriarchal subordination. Though Laila’s freedom is controlled in comparison to Sita, she is also incarcerated by the tradition in spite of her education in England and her western ways of life. She is deeply in love with Kemal, but is not daring enough to transcend religious boundaries in order to marry him. Out of frustration, she yields to the wishes of her parents and gives in to a marriage void of love, sympathy, and understanding. She is on equal footing as Saira and Zahra. Their modernity is only a simulacrum. Inwardly they are subjected to patriarchal hegemony. But she inverts the fetishistic role of ‘Sita’ in Hindu mythology, as she continues to meet Kemal even after her marriage. She considers her love for Kemal as an impetus that gives her strength to fulfil her duty towards her husband. (92) I had children by my husband though my body revolted against the touch of any man I did not love. But it was bearable if I had a hope of being with Kemal, as if that cleansed me. After he stopped seeing me it did not matter what happened. If my body could accept one man without love it could accept others. One discovers so many reasons for sleeping with a man once love is put out of the way. (297) One can assume that Sita’s ideas are perverse but through them we can easily estimate her frustration caused by her unconsummated love for Kemal. This complicated and impressive novel keeps a number of different themes smoothly in play and firmly in order. The tense bitter Laila evokes in her character and suffering a great section of life in the Indian sub-continent which has been rarely heard of from the inside—the woman smouldering, snubbing and suffocating in Purdah. Hosain’s novel is the most successful in the present context because there is such a fine balance of in her craft at every step, between men and women, between tradition and change between reason and emotion. Whereas Rushdie’s novel we find underpinning of social and political commentary take the form of exaggeration and satirical humour. Rushdie’s *Sufiya Zenobia* is an example of negative surfacing while Hosain’s *Laila* are example of moderately positive surfacing.

Islam, however is a religion as well as a legal and political tradition. It also embodies sexual, moral and ethical principles which are strictly enforced. The spiritual leaders in Islamic tradition have been at the same time, the legislator and administration of all affair of the Muslim Community. Taslima Nasrin in the preface of ‘*Lajja*’ writes about Islamic fundamentalists, who manipulated the female body as a playing card in oppositional politics: “Bangladesh is my motherland. We gained our independence from Pakistan at the cost of three million lives. That sacrifice will be betrayed if we

allow ourselves to be ruled by religious extremism. The mullahs who would murder me will kill everything progressive in Bangladesh if they are allowed to prevail...The disease of religious fundamentalism is not restricted to Bangladesh alone and it must be fought at every turn...I am convinced that the only way the fundamentalist forces can be stopped is if all of us who are secular and humanistic join together and fight their malignant influence. I, for one will not be silenced.” (ix-x)

The West, viewing the world through the lens of its own culture, interprets veiling as repression of Muslim women and a forced suppression of their sexuality. However, interactions and discussions with some Muslim women made me realize that Muslim men's attitude towards women's appearance and sexuality are not rooted in repression, but in a strong sense of public verses private, of what is a woman's due to God and what is due to one's husband. It is not Islam per se that suppresses sexuality, but it embodies a strongly developed sense of appropriate channelling of a woman's sexuality, towards marriage, i.e. the bonds that sustain family life and the attachment that secures a home. Maybe it is just the Media along with certain sections of the society which are exaggerating the threat of the veil as usual. Several posts on social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter have also depicted remarks about Muslim women being oppressed and suppressed under the “burqa”. It is simply beyond logic why people should create a commotion, over ‘women wearing burqa’ but are completely at ease with the so-called “forward” bikini clad women. There was an article on Daily Mail online dated 30th Dec 2011, where a woman was fined by police for driving in “burqa”. It was said that it was “as bad as eating sandwich behind the wheel”. The actual question, in my view therefore, is of freedom of thought. If a Muslim woman is comfortable with her dressing and doing no one any harm then why bother about it. Why fingers are not pointed with the same vigour at an advertisement of scantily clad women in ‘Lingerie’ or ‘Hot Pants’. This indicates the existence of a definite double standard in the contemporary society. Just because a woman is wearing “burqa” it does not necessarily mean she is oppressed. Perhaps she is just using it subversively, as a tool for her kind of empowerment, one in which she is comfortable and one which she finds relatively easier to negotiate. Further literary and social interventions and analyses are essential to pave the way for a more holistic theorization and comprehension of the veil and its contemporary implications.

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BIO-NOTE

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