

Unveiling the Veiled Face: Imtiaz Dharker's 'Purdah' and the Colonial Stereotype

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In this presentation I would like to examine certain contradictions that underlie the homogenizing tendencies of 20th century feminist ideology which is primarily western and positions itself as an authority on the issues of women all over the world. At the basis of such homogenizing, lies the assumption that women across all cultures share similar burdens of history, patriarchy, domesticity, motherhood and abuse; that all third world women are doubly disadvantaged as they belong to contexts of poverty, illiteracy, and a general paucity of resource and opportunity. In other words what has come under rigorous scrutiny is the tendency of western feminist scholarship to overlook the multivalent contexts of third world nations and to see all coloured non-white women as one homogenized category. This 'Othering' of women from the shadows, this undertaking of Western feminist scholarship to study the woman's question on the basis of binaries like western – eastern, first world – third world, white-brown/black, literate-illiterate, advantaged-disadvantaged; stunts and subverts the very purpose of academic inquiry.

Feminist Literary Studies began primarily with English, French and American feminist writings in 19th and early 20th century. In their early phase feminist studies were primarily western in scope; later as western feminist scholarship expanded and looked beyond its white circle, it concluded that women in the west were privileged while those from struggling eastern and middle-eastern countries were seen as the 'Other' half - the homogenized third world - universally oppressed and faceless. Susie Tharu in her 'Introduction' to *Women's Writing in India: Vol II*, terms such homogenizing tendencies as imperialist. First World feminism she says, conspires to generate exactly that which it had undertaken to resist - the reproduction of binaries like superior-inferior, male-female, first world- third world, colonizer-colonized.

Speaking on the same lines Chandra Mohanty in her essay, 'Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses,' refers to the tendency of western feminist scholarship to discursively colonize and ghettoize non-Western, 'third-world' women as the collective 'other'. This approach which labels women of third world countries as "poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, and victimized" overlooks at the same time the extant complexity, diversity, and multiplicity of women in the non-Western world. (22)

This in brief is the thesis that I would like to put across here. In the later part of this short paper I shall analyze a poem by a diasporic woman poet, Imtiaz Dharker. Contemporary and Asian, she lives in London and calls herself Scottish. Through my reading of her poem 'Purdah,' I wish to argue that although by birth a Pakistani muslim, Imtiaz Dharker brings to the Islamic practice of 'purdah,' a European gaze. Not only Dharker but most of us that are privileged and educated and Asian/Indian, suffer the damages of a colonized/westernized gaze.

An early endeavour of Feminist Literary Studies was to research the premise of 'Women and Fiction' and engage in rigorous academic inquiry. Some of the strategies employed by feminist studies are explored at length by Virginia Woolf in her treatise, *A Room of One's Own*. Woolf reiterates for feminist agenda the need for (1) the recovery of women writers and their writings from the 'silence' of the past. (2) the documentation of women's works and their histories [personal and professional] (3) the reevaluation of literature by/on women – the need to acknowledge and recover the writings of women from absence to presence – and thus to give them voice and visibility. And lastly, (4) to read canonical literary texts from feminist perspectives – examine representations of women, patterns of patriarchal dissemination and the stereotyping of gender in mainstream literature, for example, Charles Dickens's portrayal of women characters in his novels.

Feminist scholarship, in its third phase became inter disciplinary and engaged with questions of identity and formalistic expression. It explored and exposed the patriarchal constructions in language. Language itself was male/patriarchal, and therefore unfit for women writers. Women all over had inherited their language from men – the sentence the syntax was a male construct, now that women were writing they needed to think through their senses and their bodies to evolve a language, a syntax that resonated with the way women experience themselves and negotiate the world.

Post structural approaches to women's literature explored ways of devising woman-centric literatures, they entered into partnerships with disciplines like psychoanalysis, philosophy, medical science, sociology, economics, and linguistics. To chart the course of women's lives from object-hood to subject-hood that was the intention, and women scholars, mostly western, got down to the task of unpeeling years of patriarchal abuse. To recover the feminine from an absence to presence, and in the process, to heal/repair the damage.

Who were these women that were studied? Whose reality was it that was explored? Which women's literatures were retrieved and reinstated? Whose history, whose fiction formed the basis of such advanced research and scholarship?

The scholarship of Indian feminists like Susie Tharu, K. Lalitha, Kumkum Sangari and Chandra Talpade Mohanty finds that the woman of western feminist studies is white, middle-class, educated, and hails from western parts of the world. Western feminist scholarship on third world women tends to overlook many parameters that are culture specific and therefore it tends to superficiality and is skewed. To build our very own system of Indian feminist studies

we will need to dig deeper and look through the limitations of hybridized, colonial conceptualizations which often exist in the form of ideological bias and notions of progressive-regressive patterns. An account of the history of the poet-courtesan Muddupalani of the Thanjavur era, and her work *Radhika Satwanam*, in Susie Tharu's 'Introduction' (Women's Writing in India Vol II) is an example. Muddupalani was a famous devadasi and a much respected court poet who enjoyed a status equal to men in the public sphere. Women from systems of the devadasi and mujra traditions in India, enjoyed certain freedom of movement and social privilege. They lived in grey regions unlike their socially privileged but personally marginalized counterparts - the married women who led oppressed, monogamous lives in the domain of patriarchy. To study women in the Indian subcontinent, and in the South Asian continent, it is therefore imminent that we write our own women's literary histories and theories to comprehend indigenous women's writings.

Feminist Studies in the 21st century, has grown into a complex network of First world, Third world and trans-global scholarships. Post-structural formulations of feminisms and feminist studies are therefore either psychoanalytic, aesthetic, or they are located in indigenous histories and therefore, are nation-centric. We have now a multiple number of feminisms, women's literatures and histories that resist homogenization and challenge overarching feminist perspectives that replicate imperialist assumptions and homogenize coloured feminisms as the 'Other' thereby cancelling even the slim possibility that third world contexts may possess historical and socio-cultural parameters that are different but vibrant and unique. In the interplay of class, caste, race, socio-cultural contexts and histories, gender/woman is just one category. It is as much defined by its associate categories as they are defined by it. The interplay of class, caste, race, socio-cultural contexts and histories can therefore, neither be denied nor overlooked.

When we look at Indian culture and Indian history, the shadow of the colonial impact still lingers. The stain runs deep - so deeply have we absorbed and embraced as our own, colonial (even Christian) values and mindsets that we knock around in the dark like blind women unable to 'see' and therefore, unable to drink from rivers that run in our own backyards. In lieu of this I would like to examine a poem by Imtiaz Dharker.

Imtiaz Dharker, born in 1954, in Lahore, Pakistan grew up in Glasgow and moved to Bombay after marriage to Anil Dharker. She lived in Mumbai for about two decades before moving to England. She is an established poet, artist and film maker. Her poetry showcases a tight control over language and emotion. It is marked by an expression that marries beauty with strength. Poetry books published by her are as follows: *Purdah* (1989), *Postcards from God* (1997), *I Speak for the Devil* (2001), *The Terrorist at my Table* (2006), *Leaving Fingerprints* (2009). The poem I have chosen to share is from her first book of poems titled *Purdah*. In 'Purdah 1' Imtiaz Dharker, herself a muslim, critiques the islamic practice of 'purdah' from a western perspective. She sees the purdah as an agency of patriarchal control – a shroud that suffocates and makes its wearer feel exiled, emotionally marooned and ultimately a social misfit - castaway.

‘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.’

The poet’s employment of the *purdah* motif, one may argue, could merely be metaphoric and allude to personal landscapes of the poet who happens to be well educated and a privileged member of elite society (the Bombay circle.) However, it cannot be overlooked that in the hands of Imtiaz Dharker, the ‘*purdah*’ becomes an agency of intense patriarchal control, brutally violating all norms of individual freedom and expression. The *purdah* in other words is a piece of cloth that shrouds a woman’s world. Under the guise of protection the limiting folds of *hijab*, isolate the protagonist, contrive a complete erasure of identity, and eventually lead to a state of trauma and a living death.

The poem:

PURDAH (1)

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.
The cloth fans out against the skin
much like the earth that falls
on coffins after they put dead men in.

People she has known
stand up, sit down as they have always done.
But they make different angles
in the light, their eyes aslant,
a little sly.

She half-remembers things
from someone else’s life,
perhaps from yours, or mine –
carefully carrying what we do not own:
between the thighs a sense of sin.

We sit still, letting the cloth grow

a little closer to our skin.
A light filters inward
through our bodies' walls.
Voices speak inside us,
echoing in the places we have just left.

She stands outside herself,
sometimes in all four corners of a room.
Wherever she goes, she is always
inching past herself,
as if she were a clod of earth
and the roots as well,
scratching for a hold
between the first and second rib.

Passing constantly out of her own hands,
into the corner of someone else's eyes . . .
while the doors keep opening
inward and again
inward.

*

Dharker portrays the *purdah* as a reductive agency that further shrinks a woman's space and transforms her into an object of use/abuse. This is a perception that is shared by most of us who are educated and culturally distanced from the context and ideology of the practice of *purdah* (or even the *ghoonghat*.) At this point, it is interesting to note that

- Imtiaz Dharker belongs to the muslim diaspora
- That her perception is influenced by progressive western ideas of equality, independence and justice.
- that her use of the *purdah* symbol is primarily negative:

practice of the *purdah* in the poem points towards deeper patterns of suppression, patriarchal control and sexuality. The *purdah* is seen by the poet as abusive.

In light of the above observations, would it be fair to conclude that Imtiaz Dharker adopts the stance of the white woman and is located in western ideology?
How colonized or stereotypical is Dharker's interpretation of the 'purdah'?
Do all women who practice the *hijab/purdah* see it as a means of oppression?
Are there any women who actually use the *purdah* to their benefit?
What in fact are the realities of the *purdah* – the *hijab* in muslim society?

And lastly I would like to ask myself and all well educated Indian women (and men), how different are we in our views from Dharker or for that matter from western feminist scholarship in perceiving the purdah as abusive and unjust imposition on Islamic women by Islamic religion and patriarchy?

In taking the purdah out of its cultural context and perceiving it as an act of violence, isn't Dharker adopting the same 'white' approach which homogenizes and labels third world women as "poor, uneducated, tradition-bound victims"? Is she not overlooking 'the extant complexity, diversity, and multiplicity of women in the non-Western (muslim) world'?

Let us look at the history of the *purdah* as it is discussed on some sites on the google.com: The *purdah* (also known as *burqah*) is a customary veil draped by muslim women to cover their face and body in order to hide and protect themselves from male gaze. Some well known facts about the purdah:

- the *purdah* was originally a Persian practice which was adopted by 7th century Muslims during the Arab conquest of modern-day Iraq .
- the 'hijab' is an old Jewish tradition that infiltrated into the hadith books... religious Jewish women still cover their heads most of the times esp in the synagogues, at weddings and religious festivities.
- With the advent of the Mughals, the purdah prevailed in 17th century north India during the Mughal Empire - the practice of *ghoonghat* in the north among Hindu women emerged around the same time.

Muslims regard the purdah or hijab, as an aid to creating a clean pious Islamic society. The following two comments by muslim writers indicate attitudes of faith and reverence for the hijab/purdah:

'Europe regarded 'harem,' 'purdah' and veil with disfavor. The European writers portrayed these in loathsome and ugly colours and while enumerating the demerits of Islam, they mentioned the 'confinement' of women prominently.' (3)

'...modestly dressed veiled women were dubbed 'moving tents and shrouded funerals....'(4)

- Sayyid Abul A'la Mandudi in 'Purdah and the Muslims of Today,'
Purdah and the States of Women in Islam

'as the most oppressed global group particularly ravaged by colonialist aggressions, subject to rape as a tool of war and at the same time to

demilitarization, we were even denied our rights to agency and self defense. The trope of white women saving brown women from brown men was another diktat which I sought to escape. Even the idea of ‘false consciousness’ infuriated with its patronizing under currents, the only person I would need saving from was the archetypal white woman. Thank you very much.’

(Hab Siers, ‘The Burqa: Finding Freedom in Dubai,’ *The ASW Globalist*)

Contrary to stock ideas about the ‘hijab,’ an educated woman like Hab Siers resents the fact that she is not able to practice *purdah*. She reiterates Mohanty’s stance against stereotyping and her stress upon the need ‘to examine tradition with an open mind,’ and transcend stock attitudes acquired from subscribing to western systems of ideology. For not all women who wear the *purdah* feel as constricted, history provides ample evidence that counters it; nor is the tradition of the *purdah* if examined in its context without its value and merits.

I shall end with a quote of Chandra Mohanty:

To assume that the mere practice of veiling women in a number of Muslim countries indicates the universal oppression of women through sexual segregation not only is analytically reductive but also proves quite useless when it comes to the elaboration of oppositional political strategy.

...the analytic leap from the practice of veiling to an assertion of its general significance in controlling women must [therefore] be questioned.” (34, *Feminism Without Borders*)

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