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Reconceptualizing Purdah: Quranic Modesty beyond Cultural Distortions in Dharker and Jung

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Abstract

This paper reconceptualizes Purdah by clearly distinguishing its Qur'anic injunction of modesty from the culturally entrenched bad practices and interpretive distortions that shape contemporary perceptions of veiling. Challenging reductive portrayals in the writings of Muslim women authors such as Imtiaz Dharker and Anees Jung – where veiling is frequently represented as a symbol of confinement and patriarchal oppression – the study contends that such representations arise less from Islamic doctrine than from culturally conditioned frameworks and Western regimes of visibility. Drawing on social constructionism, representation theory, and postcolonial critique, the paper undertakes close comparative readings of selected literary texts – “Purdah I” & “Purdah II” & *Unveiling India* – along with the relevant Qur'anic verses (notably *Sūrah An-Nūr* and *Al-Aḥzāb*).

This paper intends to demonstrate how localized customs are often misconstrued as theological mandates. Finally, the paper recuperates the ethical intent of Purdah – grounded in the principle of reciprocal modesty for both men and women – thereby offering a critical framework for disentangling divine injunctions from cultural accretions and ideological misreadings.

Keywords: *Purdah*, Quranic modesty, cultural distortions, Islamic feminism, veiling representations, Custom and traditions & postcolonial critique.

Introduction

In the contemporary era, purdah or the veil has become a subject of much debate and controversy. The practice of observing purdah among Muslims has long been associated with extremism and is often portrayed – particularly

in the West – as a regressive custom. Some European writers have historically depicted the veil in derogatory and grotesque terms, referring to modestly dressed, veiled women as “moving tents” or “shrouded funerals.”

In the digital age, the internet and social media platforms are replete with lengthy videos of Muslim influencers explaining why they chose to remove their hijab. In fact, some feminists critique purdah as a patriarchal practice, arguing that it can restrict women's freedom, mobility, and access to education or employment. Across the world, various governments and legislative bodies have sought to enact laws limiting or banning this practice, often framing such measures as efforts to protect individual autonomy and the right to dress free from coercion.

Etymologically, the word Purdah is derived from the Persian word *Pardah* which means a curtain or a veil. The term entered English through Urdu and Hindi, where it originally referred to a physical curtain but later acquired a broader cultural meaning. It came to denote the seclusion of women from public view, often maintained through veiling practices or separate living spaces. Historically, purdah has been observed in various forms across South Asia and the Middle East, particularly among certain Muslim and Hindu communities, where it has functioned as a marker of modesty and privacy. The practice of veiling (purdah) has existed since antiquity and was observed in several ancient civilizations, including Greek, Roman, Byzantine, and Persian societies. Over time, veiling has also manifested in diverse forms across major religious traditions, such as Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism.

In Christianity, women are traditionally expected to cover their heads during church services, while men are expected to remove their hats as a sign of reverence. This practice is rooted in the biblical passage *1 Corinthians 11:4-16*, in which St. Paul outlines norms regarding head covering during worship.

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 continues in some conservative Catholic communities, as well as among Anabaptist groups such as the Amish and certain Mennonite Christians. In addition, nuns or religious sisters continue to wear a veil covering the hair and body (while leaving the face visible), typically as part of a headdress and long robe. Accordingly, when a woman enters religious life, she is traditionally 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 main 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 garment that envelops the entire body, fully concealing the face, with only a mesh or grille over the eyes to permit vision. Another form of veiling, the *boshiya*, is worn as a headscarf made of sheer fabric that covers the face completely, allowing the wearer to see through it.

Historians argue that veiling, which was initially uncommon among Arab tribes, originated in the Byzantine Empire and later spread with the rise of Islam. Within Islamic

discourse, the veil is commonly associated with ideals of female chastity and dignity, a perspective that is reflected in the teachings of the Holy Qur'an.

...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, and other parts of the body. (Quran 24:31, Surah *An-Nur*)

In Judaism, veiling is regarded as a biblical requirement associated with female modesty. Within Jewish communities, a woman's uncovered hair has traditionally been viewed as a symbol of sensuality, making the wearing of a head covering an important marker of propriety. Moreover, according to the Torah – the Five Books of Moses, also known as 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.

In Hinduism, we can find examples of women covering their heads or wearing veils in Hindu scriptures. Hindu goddess Parvati is said to have covered her face with a garment while meeting sage Narada. Padma Purana I (43.128b-133b) mentions:

Joining her lotus-like hands and concealing her face the beloved of the Mountain saluted the sage, a heap of lustre...Then the respectable daughter of the Himalaya mountain, whose mind was amazed, saw the sage Narada of wonderful form. The sage also addressed her with (these) affectionate words: 'Come, O daughter'. But embracing the father, she sat on his lap. The mother said to the respectable girl: 'O daughter, salute the revered sage, blessed with penance. (Thereby) you will obtain a husband of your liking'. Thus, addressed by her mother, "She, having covered her face with her garment and with her slightly trembling, did not utter any word." (Tr. N.A. Deshpande)

Also, in Valmiki's Ramayana, Yuddha Khanda 6, Sarga 111, verses 63-64 states:

O Lord! Are you not indeed enraged, in seeing me on foot in this way out through the city-gate, unveiled and come on foot in the way? O lover of your consorts! Look at all your spouses, who came out, with their veils dropped off. Why are you not getting enraged in seeing this? (Tr. K.M.K. Murthy)

In Islam, Purdah is derived from the interpretations of the *Holy Quran* and the *Hadith* regarding modesty and interactions. Purdah in Islam encompasses both the social practice of seclusion and the wearing of modest clothing. Both men and women are expected to observe modesty of behaviour and dress. Similar to women, men are instructed to guard their modesty which involves their being mindful of appearance, behaviour and interactions in order to maintain a sense of dignity and decency. To gain a better understanding of the concept of Purdah, let's examine relevant Quranic verses. In Chapter 24, known as *An-Nur* (the Light), in verse 30, Allah commands Prophet Muhammad (Pbuh) as:

قُلْ لِلْمُؤْمِنِينَ يَغْضُبُوا مِنْ أَبْصَارِهِمْ وَ يَخْفِظُوا فُرُوجَهُمْ
نَّلِكَ أَرْكَ لَهُمْ .

Say to the believing men that: they should cast down their glances and guard their private parts (by being chaste). This is better for them. (24:30).

This is a command to Muslim men that they should not lustfully look at women (other than their own wives); and in order to prevent any possibility of temptation, they are required to cast their glances downwards. This is known as "hijab of the eyes".

Then in the next verse Allah commands the Prophet (Pbuh) to address the women. Here begins the quote:

قُلْ لِلْمُؤْمِنَاتِ يَغْضُبْنَ مِنْ أَبْصَارِهِنَّ وَ يَخْفِظْنَ فُرُوجَهُنَّ

Say to the believing women that: they should cast down their glances and guard their private parts (by being chaste)... (24:31).

This is a similar command as given to the men in the previous verse regarding "hijab of the eyes". This *hijab* of eyes is similar to the teaching of Jesus (Pbuh) where he says:

You have heard that it was said by them of old time, you shall not commit adultery. But I say unto you, that whosoever looks on a woman to lust after her has committed adultery with her already in his heart. (See Mathew 5:27-28)

So, if you see a Muslim casting his/her eyes downwards when he/she is talking to a member of opposite sex, this should not be considered as rude or an indication of lack of confidence – he/she is just abiding by the Qur'anic as well as Biblical teaching.

After "hijab of the eyes" came the order describing the dress code for women:

وَلَا يُبَدِّلْنَ زِينَتَهُنَّ إِلَّا مَا ظَهَرَ مِنْهَا وَلِيُضْرِبْنَ بِخُمُرٍ هُنَّ جُنُوبُهُنَّ...

...and not display their beauty except what is apparent, and they should place their khumur over their bosoms... (24:31).

Now we need to know first what is the meaning of *Khumur*? used in this Verse? *Khumur* خُمُر is plural of *khimar* حِمَار, the veil covering the head. So, the word *khimar*, by definition, means a piece of cloth that covers the head. Finally, the verse goes on to give the list of the *mahram* – male family members – in whose presence the *hijab* is not required, such as the husband, the father, the father-in-law, the son(s), and others.

In Chapter 33, known as *Al-Ahzab*, verse 59, Allah gives the following command to Prophet Muhammad (Pbuh):

يَا أَيُّهَا النَّبِيُّ قُلْ لَا زَوْجَكَ وَ بَنَاتِكَ وَ نِسَاءَ الْمُؤْمِنِينَ يَبْدِلْنَ عَلَيْهِنَّ مِنْ جَلَابِيَّهُنَّ ...

O Prophet! Say to your wives, your daughters, and the women of the believers that: they should let down upon themselves their jalabib. (33:59).

Now, what is the meaning of *Jalabib*? *Jalabib* جَلَابِب is the plural of *jilbab* جَلْبَب, which means a loose outer garment. This means that the Islamic dress code for women does not only consist of a scarf that covers the head, the neck and the bosom; it also includes the overall dress that should be long and loose. In this verse Muslim women are instructed to wear a *jilbab* (outer garment) when in public. The purpose is to both identify (to be known as respectable women) and protection. Again, in Surah *Al-Ahzab* (33:53), Allah states:

..... And when you ask (His wives) for something, ask them from behind a partition. That is purer for your hearts and their hearts.... (Quran 33:53)

This verse specifically refers to the wives of the Prophet, setting a high standard of modesty. It introduces the concept of *hijab* as a partition or a barrier for interaction.

Thus, *Purdah* in the holy Quran is about modesty, not just physical covering, but also behaviour. It emphasizes lowering the gaze, modest clothing and respectful gender interaction. *Purdah and the Status of Women in Islam* mentions:

Islam has granted the woman vast social and economic rights which elevated her status and provided such moral and legal safeguards in its system for the protection of her rights and status that the like of these cannot be found in any old or modern social system of the world. (Maududi, 98).

It is ironic that Muslim women writers such as Imtiaz Dharker and Anees Jung portray the veil unfavourably in their works *Purdah Poems* and *Unveiling India* respectively. As Muslim authors, their representations – shaped by their personal interpretations and selective

understandings of religion and purdah – has significantly influenced readers' perceptions, often reinforcing negative assumptions about the practice.

Imtiaz Dharker in her "*Purdah Poems*" presents Purdah as a violation of women's rights, freedom and dignity. She conceptualizes it not merely as a physical practice but as a state of mind that restricts women's intellectual growth and self-awareness. Through her poetry, Dharker depicts purdah as both a literal and symbolic form of imprisonment. In her poem "*Purdah 1*", Purdah is depicted as a coffin, symbolizing burial of women's autonomy, this is portrayed in Dharker's poetry when she writes.

*The cloth fans out against the skin
much like the earth that falls
on coffins after they put dead women underground.*
(Lines 6-8)

This imagery equates veiling with death while alive, denying identity and freedom.

In "*Purdah II*," Imtiaz Dharker portrays religious tenets as largely indifferent to women's suffering. She represents religious principles as operating in ways that privilege men while silencing and suppressing women, thereby exposing how patriarchal interpretations of faith marginalize female experience. The poet evokes the image of innumerable women who pray devoutly yet continue to endure pain in silence, suggesting the futility of seeking comfort within such an unjust system. Dharker views this version of religion as a farce – one constructed and perpetuated by patriarchy – under whose oppressive weight women continue to fracture and break. The poem recounts the sorrowful experiences of women who struggle to free themselves from these constraints, sustained by dreams of a liberated and transformed world.

In *Unveiling India*, Anees Jung portrays purdah in a distinctly negative light by highlighting its role in suppressing women's

autonomy, identity, and potential. She vividly captures the emotional and psychological toll it exacts, as many of the women she interviews articulate deep feelings of invisibility, powerlessness, and frustration – symptoms of their exclusion from full participation in society. Jung sharpens her critique through deliberate contrasts: women constrained by purdah remain confined and diminished, while those who have broken free emerge with greater confidence, independence, and opportunity. Through her personal observations and recorded dialogues, Jung allows women's voices to speak for themselves, revealing that purdah is frequently imposed rather than freely chosen. She speaks also about herself when she met a group of educated women in India. One of the them got surprised at her bare head and questioned her: "Do you go around without a veil"? Jung in reply repeated her father's words: "Purdah is a state of mind" (Jung, P.32). Jung gives special emphasis to the fact that centuries of brainwashing has made it hard for Muslim women to eliminate such a practice.

The aforementioned debate demands answers to the following questions:

- Do Muslim Women need to be liberated from Purdah?
- Is Purdah a violation of women's rights, freedom and dignity?
- Is Purdah a stumbling block in progress among Muslim women as depicted by the above-mentioned writers?

The answers to these questions are: No, A thorough study reveals that Purdah does not hinder anyone from upholding the rights and values. Islamic history brims with the legacies of extraordinary women whose contributions elevated societies and reshaped the world – humanity remains profoundly indebted to their service. Far from oppression, many women embrace veiling as an act of empowerment: not a loss of individual identity, but the embrace of a shared, homogeneous consciousness that fosters deep solidarity and sisterhood. For them, the veil embodies femininity, superiority and

personal comfort. On January 7, 1936, Reza Shah Pahlavi issued a royal decree banning the veil to modernize Iran, but its harsh enforcement sparked widespread uproar and distress across communities. Many women and their husbands resisted the decree so fiercely that they stayed indoors for months until its repeal, while others defied it publicly by wearing full veils. This resistance revived interest in veiling, prompting even liberal, non-traditional women from middle and upper-class families to adopt the scarf and hijab. Recently, women in India have protested in support of hijab rights primarily during the 2022 Karnataka hijab controversy, where Muslim students challenged bans on headscarves in educational institutions. It would have been impossible for countless women observing Purdah to find their place in the world and contribute to human progress had it truly impeded their empowerment. In truth, Purdah signifies modesty and dignity: it shields women from societal evils and empowers those who embrace it. Islam established women's rights long before so-called progressive societies even contemplated them. The lives of early Muslim women especially Prophet Muhammad's (SAW) wives and daughters prove this. Countless well-read and influential women spread virtuous teachings while practicing purdah and carrying out their routine business. Far from modern depictions, it offers women true dignity in this world and the hereafter.

In nutshell, the concept of Purdah has long been rooted in the principles of modesty, dignity, and mutual respect. However, over time, its true essence has been overshadowed by bad customs and wrong societal interpretations. In fact, in many communities, cultural practices have distorted Purdah into a rigid, gender-biased system that unfairly restricts women's mobility, education, progress and participation in public life. This is a deviation from the original intent, which emphasized modest conduct for both men and women without imposing unjust limitations. Hence, it is not

Purdah that is oppressive, but the way it has been applied through inherited customs that have no basis in authentic religious teachings. Therefore, to understand Purdah correctly, one must distinguish between divine guidance and man-made traditions that have led to its misrepresentation.

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