



THE TRADITION OF *PURDAH* AS A CATALYST FOR WOMEN EMPOWERMENT IN SHAISTA IKRAMULLAH'S AUTOBIOGRAPHY

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Abstract

This research aims to explore how Shaista Ikramullah develops a counter discourse to the stereotypical perceptions of the westerner's as well as Oriental's regarding the Muslim women living in *purdah* in her book, *From Purdah to Parliament* (2000). The researcher then sheds light on contemporary feminist movements in Pakistan in comparison with the women living in *Purdah* during the author's life. The researcher makes use of the theory *Orientalism* (1978) presented by Said to better understand how the westerners view the East which is far different from the reality. Moreover, the researcher also makes use of Post-colonial Feminism by taking the work of Mohanty (1984) to further interrogate this subject. For analysis, the researcher has done a close reading of the memoir to better interrogate how Shaista has presented the women in the text. Furthermore, it is concluded that the text negates western perceptions about Muslim women through her discourse and shows how empowered these women were living in the *purdah* whom the westerners viewed as oppressed and isolated. Being in *purdah* reflected great honour attached to these women who were well educated, civilized, and had great authority in their households and society in general.

Keywords: *Feminism, Orientalism, Postcolonialism, Purdah, Stereotyping.*

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1. Introduction

This study aims to explore the notion of *Purdah*, as an empowering tradition for Muslim women in the pre-partition subcontinent which continued to impart the ethics of respectful socio-cultural relationships and functional roles for women in the political environment of the Pakistan Movement, in Ikramullah's *From Purdah to Parliament* (2000). In the contemporary era where Pakistani women are seen to be struggling with achieving their basic rights, Ikramullah deciphers the fact that women were actually more empowered and privileged while they were in *Purdah*. And when women were needed politically for the Pakistan Movement for freedom, it was their traditional upbringing in the *Purdah* that led them to carry themselves gracefully to struggle for a free homeland alongside men. Although women came out of their houses to participate in the achievement of a free homeland, they never let go of their traditional religious values that included modest dressing, being attentive to their households and children, and most importantly paying respect to their tradition, religion and the men that stood with them. With these ethics and values pre-partition women became a political force alongside men to achieve their homeland.

The study is significant in the light of current feminist trends in Pakistan. It seems that it is not just the West that sees the privileges of *Purdah* as oppressive but Pakistani women have also started to get confused about the value of this tradition. This paper tends to shed light on the said concern using the memoir of one of the most politically strong and active woman in the history of Pakistan that is Begum Shaista Ikramullah. It is also noted here that the concept of *Purdah* as employed in this paper is not equivalent to the idea of "veiling" as is associated with it in the contemporary tradition. *Purdah* here is used as the traditional norm that prevailed in pre/post-colonial subcontinent of women staying indoors and in places of the house where mostly men would not be entertained. It was therefore the women's space where they enjoyed the privilege of ruling the household and enjoying their luxury time.

Begum Shaista Ikramullah was the first female representative of the first Constituent Assembly of Pakistan in 1947 after the partition; born in July 22nd, 1915, she was one of the many brave Muslim women who took an active part in the Pakistan Movement. She got her education from Calcutta and London but loved her traditional culture and values. Her memoir, '*From Purdah to Parliament*' elaborates her life experiences from the days of British Raj to the partition and creation of our homeland Pakistan. The historical narrative covers three eras; Pre-colonial, colonial subcontinent and the post-independent subcontinent and is therefore one of its own kind as a historical treatise. Her book gives us a complete narrative of her childhood, traditional culture and

values of that time in which she grew up, her marriage and the social and political arena. As evident from the title of her book, she gives us a whole picture of how her life started in strict *Purdah* which she considered very honorable but as it was the need of time she had to leave the *Purdah* to get out and take part in the Pakistan movement. So, the title basically suggests her journey *From Purdah to Parliament*. Throughout the text we come to know how the Muslim women were like in British India, how they lived their lives and what were the roles given to them and Shaista through her book shows us how empowered these women were. Shaista develops a complete counter narrative discourse to the western perceptions of Eastern (Orient) women, to tell us about the Muslim women of British India, proving how wrong the western perceptions are regarding Muslim women. In this study, the researcher will investigate how empowered Muslim women were in British India as shown by Shaista in the text, and the extent to which the western perceptions are wrong about the 'orient' specifically the women living in the orient, keeping in view the *Orientalism* presented by Said (1978) and *Post-Colonial Feminism* by taking the ideas of Mohanty (1984). The researcher will further bring to light the current scenario of feminism movements in Pakistan keeping in view the Muslim women of British India.

Said's *Orientalism* is a criticism of Westerners' study of the East and its ideology. Said explores the East's historical, social, and political views, which are largely a Western creation, and examines how they evolved and where they came from. As Said states, "*Orientalism* can be discussed and analyzed as the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it settling it, ruling over it: in short, *Orientalism* as a Western style for dominating restructuring, and having authority over the Orient" (Said 1978, 11). It is a western propaganda against the East which they very carefully planned and produced "during the post-Enlightenment period". He emphasizes, however, that *Orientalism* has very real implications for the relationship between the East and the West. If we talk about the Muslim women, it is apparent that there is a specific view of our women in western countries which they themselves produced and which is a lot different from how our women actually live and lead their lives. A resurgent imperial feminism even assumes that "it is the duty of white women to save brown women from brown men" (Maira 2009, 641). *Orientalism* isn't just about the "representations and stereotypes of the orient but it is also about how these are essential to projects of domination" (Abu-Lughod 2002, 785). The misconceptions about the orient and the women living in the orient are obviously false because they are a construct of the so-called westerners and western white women think it is their rightful duty to save the Muslim women from the oppressed, patriarchal and uncivilized world of the orient. Shaista tries to present a counter discourse to these

stereotypical notions produced by the west and clears some of these wrong perceptions of the westerners that they hold regarding the Muslim women and their lives in the *Purdah*.

Mohanty became popular worldwide after her groundbreaking article, *Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses* was published in 1986. In this essay, Mohanty aims to “analyze is specifically the production of the "Third World Woman" as a singular monolithic subject in some recent (Western) feminist texts” (Mohanty 1984, 333). She states that the western feminists portray the Muslim women as victims of traditional culture and masculine control without taking into notice the historical and cultural differences that are there and that differentiate the west from the third world. She talks about how these western women with their discourse “produces the image of an ‘average third world woman’. This average third world woman leads an essentially truncated life based on her feminine gender (read: sexually con-strained) and being "third world" (read: ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, domestic, family-oriented, victimized, etc.). This, I women as educated, modern, as having control over their own bodies and sexualities, and the freedom to make their own decisions” (Mohanty 1984, 337). Mohanty argues that imperial feminists are in the habit of treating all the third world women as a homogeneous group where they see all these women as the same and put them into one category, ignoring their varied experiences.

1.1. Research Statement

From Purdah to Parliament (2000) by Ikramullah is a simple yet absorbing narrative of the life and times of the author as an empowered Muslim woman living through pre/post-colonial sub-continent. The account covers the days of the British Raj and its aftermath. Through the life of one individual, we witness the changes wrought through the influence of the West in many *Purdah*-observing households. Shaista describes how women took the concept of *Purdah* as a great honor and a moral reflection of tradition. She herself was a very traditional woman who made it to the parliament, the United Nations and the Foreign Service of Pakistan being raised in and by the women in *Purdah*. Instead of considering *Purdah* as a hurdle in her highly influential political career, Shaista believes it to be the stimulus for her to stay connected with her religious/ cultural values which ultimately proved the fact that the Muslims were different from Hindus and British in their values. The researcher aims to explore how the text negates the western/oriental misconceptions regarding Muslim women in her memoir in the light of Said’s *Orientalism* and *Post-Colonial Feminism* by Mohanty. The researcher further aims to investigate how the concept of *Purdah* has transformed in the Muslim households and in the lives of contemporary Pakistani women.

1.2. The Notion of *Purdah* in Pre/Post Independence Sub-continent

Although *Purdah*, (Papanek 1973) is the word most commonly used for the system of secluding women and enforcing high standards of female modesty in much of South Asia. However, only Shaista and other great women from the times of Pre-partition also let us glance through the wonderful lives they had inside *Purdah*. One of these women is Zarina Bhatti who, like Shaista Ikramullah, was brought up in a traditional family where *Purdah* was observed and respected and had the same great honor attached with it. Bhatti (2016) states how there was a “doli” that was specifically for the women whenever they wanted to go visiting. She writes, “the doli would be covered with thick cloth from all the four sides; the kahaars were then called in to carry it”. She further writes how her khala oversaw everything and her nana provided her khala all “the finances for running the household.”

Purdah in Islam has great respect, honor and dignity attached with it. As Khalil & Azimi (2014) discuss the role of *Purdah* in their research, they state “When a woman covers herself, she places herself on a higher level and allows men to see and respect her for her intellect, faith and personality”. It is for the protection of women. Syed & Ali (2005) in their paper talk about the “Islamic concept of modesty” and argue how the “Quran ordains women to use an outer garment while going out of their dwellings.”

“O Prophet! Tell thy wives and thy daughters and the women of the believers to draw their gown or outer garments close around them (when they go out). That will be better that they may be recognized and not annoyed. Allah is forgiving, Merciful” (Qur’an 33:59).

Purdah is much more than just a garment; it is an ideology which protects and separates the boundaries of Muslim women by defining their sexual morality, but some people started taking it as an excuse to marginalize women and restrict their autonomy and liberty (Asha 2008).

However, with time and after the creation of Pakistan, there has been a great shift in the concept of *Purdah*. As Papanek (1973) writes, “*Purdah* is the word most commonly used for the system of secluding women and enforcing high standards of female modesty in much of South Asia” but the women in *Purdah* are mostly inaccessible to researchers. No wonder Pakistani women and researchers too have started to get confused about the value of this tradition. Unfortunately, some of the people in Pakistan have started to link this tradition with patriarchy when in reality it has nothing to do with it. Haque (2003) writes in her paper that it shouldn’t be the women to practice *Purdah* as it is men who force it on them, rather men should practice *Purdah* “of the heart and the eyes.” It is

obvious that the concept of *Purdah* in the contemporary society is highly misunderstood. Women can get and practice their rights in a modest way by following their traditions too. Haque (2003) further writes that *Purdah* has now taken the “shape of oppression, effectively alienating women from public life and ensuring the segregation of the sexes”. The current feminists in Pakistan present the concept of *Purdah* as that of a cage where the women are “caged like animals.” (Zakaria 2014). Another work done by Singh (2015) analyses Imtiaz Dharker’s concept of *Purdah*. He states that Dharker who “herself is a Muslim, critiques the Islamic practice of ‘*Purdah*’ from a western perspective” by seeing it as an “agency of Patriarchal control” and “a shroud” that controls and “suffocates” women. The contemporary feminist researchers view *Purdah* or modesty as “the patriarchal system, based on the traditional and biased interpretation of Islamic principles.” (Luniewska 2016) The current Pakistani feminists can still ask for their rights which Islam has provided them and exercise those rights by following their own culture, dress code and traditions which will surely make the things much easier for them.

2. Research Methodology:

This research makes use of theoretical framework comprised of *Orientalism* by Edward Said and *Post-Colonial Feminism* by Chandra Talpade Mohanty to find out the misconceptions of the westerners regarding Muslim women and the concept of *Purdah* in Muslim households. For the objectives of the study the memoir *From Purdah to Parliament* (2000) by Begum Shaista Ikramullah has been selected to present a counter discourse to all the western perceptions of Muslim women. For this purpose, close reading of the memoir is done to better examine the narrator’s perspective regarding Muslim women in the text. Kain (1998) states when you close read, you observe facts and details about the written literary text. You may focus on a particular passage, or on the text as a whole. Your aim may be to notice all striking features of the text or, your aim may be to notice only selected features of the text. In the current paper, the researcher aims to only take note of the passages where women in the Muslim households are discussed and presented. The researcher will analyze all these quotations/instances and take everything into account regarding the tradition values Muslim women lived through while living in *Purdah*. The second step in close reading is interpreting your observations, “moving from the observation of particular facts and details to a conclusion, or interpretation, based on those observations.” (Kain 1998) Close reading of the text describes the women in *Purdah* as very empowered and happy with the concept of *Purdah* as it was a great honor for them.

3. Analysis:

In her memoir, *From Purdah to Parliament* (2000), Shaista Ikramullah negates and challenges all the wrong perceptions of westerner's as well as Oriental's about the life of the women specifically orient women living and performing their socio-cultural roles as mentors in *Purdah*. She explains how the concept of *Purdah* in Muslim households at the time of British India was different. It wasn't just about veiling for the sake of covering one's self but had great honor attached with it and still does. This honor was given to women in a sense that they were kept aside, in special places and they were not exposed to ordinary men. These women were not isolated in the *Purdah* as the westerners think they are. The Muslim women living in *Purdah* were in fact more informed and privileged than the men, as *there were the women vendors, the choori-wali, and the bisatin. They all came all day bringing a hundred and one attractive little things* (Ikramullah 2000, 20). Shaista tells us how these women brought all the things like *kajal, perfume, even embroidered slippers for the women of the house but actually their most important role was that of purveyors of news* (Ikramullah 2000, 20). They bought all the detailed news about all the well-known families to keep the women in *Purdah* informed about their contemporaries. So, the western perception that women can't connect with the mainstream inside the *Purdah* and they are isolated when they are in *Purdah* is a complete western construct and has nothing to do with the reality. Shaista talks about the extraordinary benefits that the women in the *Purdah* had, she explains how these women *had all the fun of shopping without having to push and jostle in a crowd and stand for hours waiting their turn to be served. For they did not go to the shops, the shops came to them* (Ikramullah 2000, 23) and this basically negates the westerners construct about the orient women *that the poor things missed all the fun of shopping* (Ikramullah 2000, 23) because the ladies had all the fun of the greatest shopping at their service without having to move on their own.

The selection of the words that Shaista uses in her book actually show us how empowered these Muslim women were. She uses the word *takhat* that symbolizes the kind of a throne that the westerners believe the men in our society enjoy but she says that actually the status of a *takht* was given to the women and it was the women who would sit on the *takht* and rule the house. Shaista explains how when the *merchants and gotay-walas came, the takhat on the ladies verandah was turned into the most attractive of counter* (Ikramullah 2000, 23). There were *takhat* in the verandah specifically for women which tell us how much authority women basically had. It wasn't like the women in *Purdah* weren't allowed outside but whenever they went out, they would go out in a very respectable way, their carriages were very outstanding, and people would make way for

those because they knew it was a woman going inside it. And with the political scenario that was going on they even took part in the Pakistan movement and participated in public meetings and Quaid would encourage them to do so because he believed in women's emancipation (Ikramullah 2000, 105) and more and more women became politically conscious and took part in politics. So just being inside the *Purdah* wasn't about oppression but she says that it was a matter of great respect. As Abu-Lughod (2002) states, "veiling itself must not be confused with, or made to stand for, lack of agency for it is a form of covering in the subcontinent and Southwest Asia that has developed as a convention for symbolizing women's modesty or respectability" (786).

Shaista further writes how the western women like to enjoy the things by displaying them but ...*the attraction lies in the beauty of the ware* (Ikramullah 2000, 23) and that is what the women in the *Purdah* experienced. Just to display them is not the only joy in the world. This gives a very important image of the women in *Purdah* at that time and the idea that women were not as oppressed and isolated; they enjoyed every leisure of shopping and life in general, as Shaista writes, *I now often sigh for that leisurely shopping of behind the veil* (Ikramullah 2000, 24). Words like leisurely and the sadness Shaista shows through her use of the word sigh tells how magnificent the experience of shopping behind the veil which was only the women in the orient enjoyed. So, *From Purdah to Parliament* acts as a counter narrative to the westerners' perception of Muslim women in the orient that they are oppressed, isolated, and can't enjoy the basic joys of womanhood. They, in fact, have complete control over their lives.

Talking about the literary taste of the Indian Muslims, she explains how at that time the quality of being literary was seen as being educated. Indian Muslims were highly civilized and had a great literary taste, and not only men read and write poetry but *the ladies also did so* (Ikramullah 2000, 26). This again negates the western perception that the women in *Purdah* aren't allowed to read and write. Basically, the creation of the image of the "third world woman as always and everywhere oppressed is what sustains the illusion of first world women's autonomy; the assumption that they are secular, liberated, and have control over their own live" (Mohanty 1984, 353). Shaista negates this production of the third world woman created by the westerners for their own autonomy and states how *in every family there would be at least one or two women poets* (Ikramullah 2000, 23). Women too, read and wrote poetry and women were also very educated and civilized and the fathers would encourage their girls to read, and they would buy them new books and explain difficult passages to them.

Another great perception of the westerners about the women living in the orient is that Muslim women are not asked for their will before marriage. They can't opt for getting married to a certain person, and this to westerners is a huge problem. As Shaista states,

one of the things all my western friends ask is, 'Did you not object to your marriage being arranged?' And they are surprised when I say, No, I did not (Ikramullah 2000, 45). The author explains that this is a very common practice and women generally are not very much upset about it because it is a part of our culture. This tradition is even in some of the European countries where arranged marriages are even held for political and religious reasons. So, why is it so problematic when it comes to eastern women? She says, to us marriage was an institution. Marriage itself was treated as a very sacred institution at that time and it was not considered as a love-match as westerners think it is. It was to be preserved and protected.

Shaista herself was a very traditional woman and carried her traditional values throughout her life; in fact she did not just respect her tradition but was very proud of it. Nowhere in her lifetime had she felt ashamed of a dress or a hairdo or any other traditional value that she had followed. And just like her, all the other women that she is trying to show us in her book are very empowered and all of them seem to be very fond of their tradition and have great authority inside the *Purdah*, they are not oppressed rather they have embraced their traditions and culture with their own free will. She states,

Actually, women in Muslim households invariably had great influence and a much greater say in household affairs than their menfolk. The fact that they observed Purdah did not mean they were nonentities, though I know this is a general impression in the West and, like many other impressions, it is an erroneous one (Ikramullah 2000, 62).

These statements completely negate the western perceptions about the Muslim women but the westerners aren't ready to accept the reality yet because as Said states, "The main thing for a European visitor was a European representation of the Orient" (Said 1978, 9) which is their own production. In reality, women were not oppressed by this system, rather they were happy about it because they were given honorable and worthy status in the households where they chose to stay away and not expose themselves to ordinary common men. Abu-Lughod (2002) argues, "we need to work against the reductive interpretation of 'veil' as the quintessential sign of women's unfreedom" (786). On leaving *Purdah* to enter into politics, which became the need of the hour, she describes how difficult it was for her to leave that honorable status of being inside the *Purdah*, Shaista writes, *I did not enjoy my first experience of being out of Purdah at all. I felt embarrassed at being looked at by hundreds of men...* (Ikramullah 2000, 68). These lines show how difficult it was to leave that high status that women had inside the *Purdah* where no ordinary men were allowed to look at them, it was a matter of high respect and she really admired that status about which she is telling us throughout the text. Nowhere in the text have we seen her criticizing *Purdah*.

Another stereotypical representation of the west about the women in the orient is that she has no control over her life and she is controlled completely by the men of her house. As Said states, “She never spoke of herself, she never represented her emotions, presence, or history. He spoke for and represented her” (Said 1978, 14). But Shaista with her counter discourse negates this and tells us how it was her husband who motivated her to leave *Purdah* and get into politics, it was her husband who encouraged her to take part in the movement and he was her strength. Shaista writes, *but what can I say is that but for his support, understanding and tolerance it would not have been possible for me to continue working actively in the Muslim league.* (Ikramullah 2000, 91). She tells us how her husband would defend her in public and to anybody *who had the impertinence to say why does not Ikramullah control his wife* (91). This negates the western perceptions that all men do in the orient is control their women and suppress them in every way possible. Shaista through her experience tells us that this was not so. Throughout her text Shaista tells us how her husband stood by her in every difficulty and motivated her to do the right things. These productions that the Westerners made regarding the Orient not only define us but also. As Said (1978) states, “In addition, the Orient has helped to define Europe (or the West) as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience” (9). If the westerners are portraying us or our women as weak, uncivilized and isolated, they’re indirectly trying to tell the world that they (west) on the other hand treat their women really well and their women lives a very civilized and free life. The white woman even thinks that she can save the brown woman from all the violence and patriarchy that she faces in the Orient. But as Maira (2009) states, “Such imperial feminists show little sympathy for the Afghan (and now Pakistani) women and children bombed by the United States and U.S.-backed forces, for girls who were raped and murdered by U.S. soldiers in Iraq, or for Palestinian women who live under an illegal occupation funded and supported by the United States” (642). What about the rights of these women? Why is it that the actions they (west) do are always justifiable?

The sad part is that “the oppressed Muslim/Middle Eastern woman is no longer just produced by Western feminists but is also self-produced by Muslim authors in the spirit of entrepreneurial capitalism, while carefully protected and promoted by Western states, media” (Maira 2009, 648). Any Muslim author who produces the same image of the Orient women as the westerners perceive them is automatically a “good Muslim” in the books of the Occident.

4. Conclusion

This article demonstrates that the Western assumptions about the orient and specifically the women living in the orient have nothing to do with the actual reality as

Shaista explains in her text, *From Purdah to Parliament* (2000) their understanding has nothing to do with how women actually live in the Orient and how women empowered they are in *Purdah*. All that Westerners care about is their own negative stereotypical perceptions of the East and the women who live there. Western women talk about brown women's liberation, believing it's their legitimate responsibility to do so, but Shaista Ikramullah shows us how it's not required at all because our women have the advantages they can't even imagine. Further, we come to know about the transformation of *Purdah* and traditions in the Muslim households in today's time. The Muslim women of today have forgotten about her traditions in mimicking the westerner and started taking *Purdah* as a hurdle which is basically creating even more hurdles for her.

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