

PURDAH AND POWER: UNVEILING THE LINKS*

Annette Gomis
Universidad de Zaragoza

ABSTRACT

Purdah in South Asia is a complex phenomenon that defies easy analysis. This paper reveals some of its complexities and establishes a parallel between common features to *Sunlight on a Broken Column* and *Inside the Haveli*: attitudes to *purdah*, and the loss of power. It is argued that *purdah* is an integral part of the power structure of the societies depicted and social immobility symbolised in a determination to conserve the *purdah* mentality signals the death of a way of life based on this tradition.

KEY WORDS: *Purdah*, Indian literature, Hinduism, Islam, tradition.

RESUMEN

El fenómeno en el subcontinente indio del *purdah*, o reclusión y aislamiento de la mujer, es complejo y requiere un análisis pormenorizado. Este trabajo revela algunas de sus complejidades y establece un paralelismo entre rasgos comunes de *Sunlight on a Broken Column* e *Inside the Haveli*: las actitudes frente al *purdah* y la pérdida de poder. Se argumenta que la reclusión de la mujer es un componente integral de la estructura de poder en las sociedades descritas. La inmovilidad social, simbolizada por una afirmación de la mentalidad *purdah* señala la muerte de un modo de vida basado en esta tradición.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Reclusión femenina, literatura de la India, Hinduismo, Islam, tradición.

An interest in the question of *purdah* with its figure of the confined woman has long been a part of a fascination with the exotic East. The wealth of anthropological and sociological studies of female seclusion attest to its importance, and mark it off as a significant phenomenon worthy of more detailed investigation. This paper examines the phenomenon of *purdah* in South Asia, drawing first on sociological and anthropological studies, and in a second part, explores the links revealed between *purdah* and power in the Hindu Rama Mehta's *Inside the Haveli* and the Muslim Attia Hossain's *Sunlight on a Broken Column*. Both novels depict *purdah* societies and while there are striking differences between them, particularly as regards the authors' standpoint regarding female seclusion, both share an underlying message that relates adaptability to change brought about by loss of power, and attitudes to *purdah*.

Cultural relativism is a contentious issue, but one that cannot be avoided. Those of us who examine phenomena not directly related to our own experience need to be clear about the criteria that we establish. If our otherness is related to



time, how do we consider, say, the question of slavery? Probably we would all agree that as an institution it was/is both a wicked and totally unjustifiable case of the exploitation of those who wield power over weaker members of their own, or other communities. Yet do we measure the slavery as practised in Ancient Greece by the same yardstick as that of the eighteenth-century Caribbean plantations or of the nineteenth-century secessionist states of America? If we find the latter more objectionable, why is this? Is it because we see these slave owners as closer to ourselves? Is this a tenable criterion? Similarly, if our otherness is a question of cultural difference, how do we account for our interpretations of certain events and practices?

I have written elsewhere of the reaction in the West to the news of mass-scale rape of Croatian women by Serbs during the Yugoslav wars of the early nineties. American feminists were particularly sympathetic to these women's plight, and their solidarity was marked, among other things, by their sending psychologists and psychiatrists to help in counselling rape victims. What they did not foresee, however, is that for many of these victims, rape figured rather low down on their personal list of misfortunes. For women who in many cases were miserably poor and had lost their homes, their husbands and their children, their rape was just not the worst tragedy that had befallen them, while for a Western middle-class woman it often probably is. The example of the Bosnian rapes was brought to my mind in connection with my research on *purdah* when the Taliban were ousted from Kabul. The Western media instantly became fixated with the *burqa* and equated the advent of a less totalitarian regime with the shedding of this symbol of female oppression. When Afghani women did not all rush *en masse* to free themselves of this visible manifestation of oppression I have failed to see much explanation of their apparent oversight, except perhaps to consider it as yet another sign of their total submission to male dominated values. Yet the fact is, that the more one learns about the veil and female seclusion and their function in different societies, the greater the realisation about how they represent far more complex issues than our simple condemnation and consignment of them to the ills of patriarchy allow us to believe. When we hear a Muslim woman saying that for her the *burqa* is not necessarily a terrible object of confinement but rather a liberating element, then it is easy to put this view down to her own lack of knowledge and insight. But this "easy" judgement is only that, easy: it will confirm a view we perhaps cherish but it will not take into account the multifaceted reality of the phenomenon. Looking at a different society from the viewpoint of our own society is indeed highly problematic. My point is of course, that we must be careful in our scrutiny of those phenomena that are other to us and in the case of cultural differences, although it might be convenient to fit a certain phenomenon into how we choose to see the world, it might not be very perceptive. I believe that we should aim to understand how and why things *are* before placing our em-

* The research for this paper has been financed by the Spanish Ministry of Science and Technology. Research project CICYT/Feder BFF2000-2170.

phasis on how they *should* be. An example that illustrates the complexity of issues is the apparent paradox that exists with Western feminists' insistence on the woman's right to abort and the incidence of Hindu women aborting female foetuses.

In the case of analysis of the literatures of cultures that are other to us, I further believe that it is important to try to understand as much as possible about the society from which that literature emanates, thereby of course, falling into the trap that Harold Bloom so scathingly denounced of becoming amateur sociologists and anthropologists. Although I am aware that this standpoint has other powerful detractors as well as Bloom, in my opinion it does avoid falling into the other trap of contenting ourselves with viewing these literatures solely from a viewpoint based on the Western tradition of scholarship. Obvious examples of this kind of interpretation are those studies that only consider analyses by Western scholars. Accordingly, when attempting to characterise the highly complex phenomenon of purdah in India one must be aware of the dangers inherent in any approximation from the outside, thus making South Asian sources particularly valuable.

As with all things Indian, generalisations will inevitably only tell part of the story; issues such as caste, class, region, urban or rural location must be taken into account, and are but some of the determining factors in the differing manifestations of purdah. For example, while Muslim women tend to be veiled throughout the country, the veiling of Hindu women and the curtailment of their activity outside the home is much more widespread in Northern India, as opposed to the South where the purdah situation is more relaxed. This in turn is just another reflection of the wide differences that exist between the North and the South. The novels that illustrate my hypothesis are both situated in Northern India where, because it is not restricted to the Muslim community alone, illustrations of purdah in narrative are more frequent and specific. There are numerous symbolic instances of female seclusion in literature of the South, a well-known and particularly interesting example of which is R.K. Narayan's *The Dark Room*.

The etymology of the term "purdah", is commonly believed to be an Anglicisation of the Persian word *parda*, signifying a "curtain". Be that as it may, the direct and symbolic significations of the term account for physical, social and psychological facets of the institution of purdah. Far from being merely a physical isolation in terms of dress and living space it constitutes a mental attitude to a woman's whole existence. Uma Parameswan comments upon the two related but distinct meanings characterised by the woman wearing a veil or a burqa to cover her face from public view and the other, that 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."¹ With regard to the relationship between the

¹ Uma PARAMESWARAN "Purdah in Salman Rushdie, Attia Hosain and Rama Mehta," *Margins of Erasure: Purdah in the Subcontinental Novel in English*, ed. Jasbir Jain and Amina Amin (Delhi: Sterling, 1995) 53.

functions of veiling and the social structure of Indian society, Emma Tarlo points out that according to Doranne Jacobson's interpretation in her study of 1970, purdah is a distancing mechanism that achieves the reduction of the tensions inherent in the joint family system. Studies such as those of Sharma (1978) further indicate that the practice of veiling actually structures relations within a village in that it prevents married women from "gaining access to all those with power". Thus the veil renders a woman "socially invisible", and consequently "once veiled a woman is unable to participate in public debate".²

The present paper concerns itself with the links between purdah and power. Nowhere is the element of power so evident as in the issue of power over women's bodies, an integral component of all manifestations of purdah. Since the very base of purdah lies in inequality, the subordination of women whose space of action is confined and whose body is controlled, finds its metaphor in purdah as a symbol of the imbalance of power relationships. Just how unequal they are is well illustrated by Jasbir Jain's assertion that purdah denies women the status of adulthood.³

The significant studies carried out in the 1970s by Doranne Jacobson and Papanek both take as their starting point the premise that purdah is an aspect of an institution or system that can be isolated for analytical purposes. Accordingly, while purdah exists in both the Hindu and the Muslim communities it functions in a different way and for a different purpose. To add to the complexities of differing manifestations of purdah itself, while there is a general consensus about the origin of Muslim purdah (although not about its practice), there are differing interpretations of how Hindu purdah originated. Thus, Papanek observes that the general belief is that Hindu purdah was "a kind of defensive reaction adopted at the time of the Muslim invasions in order to protect their women."⁴ Advocates of other points of view cite from the rules of feminine modesty laid down in Hindu scriptures or in later writings.⁵ She refers to the analysis Jacobson makes of the differences between the two kinds of purdah where she argues that they

are not related to a Hindu inability to accurately copy Muslim purdah, but to differences in rules of kinship, marriage, inheritance, and religion between the two groups. The suggestion here is that the seclusion of women cannot be understood by viewing it as a single institution but only by examining it in its several varieties in relation to all of the cultural contexts in which it is found."⁶

² Emma TARLO, *Clothing Matters. Dress and Identity in India*. (London: Hurst & Company, 1996) 2.

³ Jasbir JAIN, "Erasing the Margins: Questioning Purdah," *Margins of Erasure: Purdah in the Subcontinental Novel in English*, ed. Jasbir Jain and Amina Amin (Delhi: Sterling, 1995) 7.

⁴ A parallel case of such a defence reaction is seen in the practice of child marriage which is believed to have become widely prevalent at the time of the Muslim invasions. Since Muslims respected married women, the marrying off of a child ensured her safety.

⁵ Hanna PAPANEK, "Purdah: Separate Worlds and Symbolic Shelter," *Separate Worlds: Studies of Purdah in South Asia*, ed. Hanna Papanek and Gail Minault (Delhi: Chanakya, 1982) 3.

⁶ PAPANEK 20.



So, for example, Zoya Hasan writing about Muslims of North India notes that in general Muslims are regarded as belonging to a static community intent on preserving its unchanging identity by constant “commitment to an absolute Islam”. It is this “monolithic character” that primarily accounts for both their vision of the world and the fundamentalism of their zeal. Hasan cautions against the essentialism implied in such a view. Again the main concern is to avoid an interpretation that “oversimplifies a complex and highly diverse terrain without coming to terms with social diversities, cultural pluralism, the specificities of historical context and the radical negotiability of the concept of identity.”⁷

In her discussion of the differences between Hindu and Muslim purdah Papanek notes that there is a general feeling in Pakistani Muslim society that women have strong sexual desires that are difficult to control. This is a view that is borne out by study of different readings of the Islamic vision of woman, and evidently is a causative factor with regard to purdah. There is a strong tendency in Muslim marriages to arrange unions between cousins, while as a general rule this is not so for Hindus.⁸ Muslim purdah restrictions do not apply to immediate kin while for Hindus purdah is “based on a set of avoidance rules between a woman and her male affines”.⁹ The explanation for this can be understood by reference to the North Indian custom of finding husbands for girls from different villages. In this situation a “man’s wife comes to him as a stranger, chosen for him as a result of negotiations in which he and she have had little to say”. Her role is consequently that of an “emissary of the race of women” thereby embodying “carnal temptation, for the seduction from the idea values represented by his father and his guru.”¹⁰ According to this point of view the practice of purdah with its avoidance rules functions to protect both men and women.

The symbolic significance of purdah should account for the implications of the position of women in the society of South Asia. This society is characterised by a value system that prizes group solidarity and endogamy, and conformity to group norms. As Papanek argues, the notion of a person or group of persons embodying certain vital attributes of another group or person “is absolutely central to the notion of symbolic shelter in purdah society” through which the woman becomes in effect the guarantor of group honour and the “status demonstrator”.¹¹ In both Hindu

⁷ Zoya HASAN, “Contextualising Gender and Identity in Contemporary India,” *Forging Identities: Gender, Communities and the State in India*, ed. Zoya Hasan (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1994) IX.

⁸ However, among Hindus in the southern states of Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Karnataka the preferred alliance for a girl is with her father’s sister’s son, provided he is a few years older than her. (Personal communication C.C. Bhat, Centre for Studies of Indian Diaspora, University of Hyderabad).

⁹ PAPANEK 3

¹⁰ PAPANEK 36.

¹¹ PAPANEK 37.

and Muslim communities modesty is an attribute that is considered essential for women. A key concept deriving from modesty is that of shame, which becomes embodied in certain purdah practices. In her study of the significance of clothes in a North Indian Hindu village community Tarlo makes an interesting distinction that highlights the difference she establishes between the concept of *laj* and that of *sharum*. These terms both refer to the concept of shame, but whereas *laj* is associated with veiling practices such as the drawing of the veil over the face in the presence of certain people, and is thus a behavioural response to a determined situation, *sharum* on the other hand, refers to the instinctive feelings a woman is *supposed to have*, those of shyness, modesty and shame. Accordingly, a woman “is expected to show more *sharum* than a man and failure to do so risks damaging the honour of herself, her family and her caste.”¹² In her discussion of the Muslim term *izzat* “modesty” Papanek notes that it is especially important in societies where violence is characteristic of interpersonal relationships.¹³ In Rushdie’s *Shame* in which the use and abuse of honour is such a central theme, Bilquis’s purdah is revealed as totally irrelevant to the turbulent times of Partition, a particularly violent period of India’s history. This fictional rendering reflects the outcome of real life incidents during Partition that served to free many women from purdah afterwards when it became clear that purdah had been ineffective in protecting them from the violence around them. The question of the violence of South Asian society is especially pertinent to a study that seeks to link purdah and power. Moreover, violence is particularly directed at women, and paradoxically also sometimes by women upon their own sex. Ashis Nandy offers an interesting interpretation of one of the manifestations of this latter instance of violence against women, taking the case of female infanticide and defining the structural violence towards women as a “weird expression of woman’s hostility towards womanhood and also, symbolically, towards her own self.” He regards such behaviour as a typical example of the “psychological defence of turning against self” which acts through identification with the aggressive male consequently making the woman herself “a participant in her self-repudiation and intra-aggression.”¹⁴ For Nandy the problematic status of women in South Asian society is attributable to the ambivalent attitude of men towards their own mothers. According to his interpretation Indian men fear becoming too independent of their mothers who embody the maternal principle of authority, while feeling “too defiant of the power of cosmic motherhood and too close to open anger towards [their] own mother[s].”¹⁵ The importance of this to the question of purdah (that represents an

¹² TARLO 164.

¹³ PAPANEK 38.

¹⁴ Ashis NANDY, “Woman Versus Womanliness: An Essay in Speculative Psychology,” *Margins of Erasure: Purdah in the Subcontinental Novel in India*, ed. Nanda Bal Ram (New Delhi: Sterling, 1995) 149.

¹⁵ NANDY 151.

evident gender asymmetry and consequently an imbalance of power) can be appreciated with what Nandy believes is a pervading deficiency in the Indian family structure that hampers the full integration of women into society:

Naturally, to make the issues of emancipation of woman and equality of sexes primary, one needs a culture in which conjugality is central to man-woman relationship. One seeks emancipation from and equality with one's husband and peers, not with one's father or son. If the conjugal relationship itself remains relatively peripheral, the issues of emancipation and equality must remain so too.¹⁶

Nandy's conclusion from this is that only by de-emphasising certain facets of her family and social roles and emphasising others can the Indian woman attempt to achieve what he terms the "completeness of her identity". In his view, in the West this may take the form of "defying the limits of conjugality and giving new dignity to the maternal role of woman", but in India it may "involve transcending the partial dignity imposed by motherhood and winning a new respect for conjugality".¹⁷ With this perception the differences between Western concerns and those of the Indian subcontinent are highlighted. Here, as Jain indicates, a major problem is that female sexuality is only acceptable when associated with the maternal role; otherwise it is perceived as deeply threatening.¹⁸

Significantly, unlike in the West, it cannot be assumed in South Asia that a woman working outside the home is likely to be particularly liberated. Indeed, T.N. Madan expresses "dismay" with the idea commonly held by "educated people and social scientists" that "the key to an improvement in the position of the woman at home is her access to an independent income". For one, she may not be able to dispose of the income she brings into the household. Madan writes of "middle class and lower-middle class working women whose lot is much worse than that of those other similarly placed women who do not work", considering received Western feminist assumptions about the working woman "very questionable".¹⁹ Similarly, Patricia Jeffery in her study of the Muslim *pirzada* community outside Delhi, reflects that while purdah may well restrict and seclude, the women she interviewed were conscious that their purdah meant that they were spared having to confront the undoubtedly difficult economic realities of life, and that accordingly, while their menfolk have to contend with these problems, the women's role only requires them to look after the house, the cooking and the children²⁰. She concludes that "[c]alls for the abolition of *purdah* [...] should not fail to relate the seclusion of *some* women

¹⁶ NANDY 158.

¹⁷ NANDY 159-160.

¹⁸ JAIN 8.

¹⁹ T.N. MADAN, "The Hindu Woman at Home," *Margins of Erasure: Purdah in the Subcontinental Novel in India*, ed. Nanda Bal Ram (New Delhi: Sterling, 1995) 71.

²⁰ Patricia JEFFERY, *Frogs in a Well: Indian Women in Purdah*. (London: Zed, 1979) 13.

to the wider system of stratification into which it is integrated.” She warns that it is not possible “to anticipate the end of *purdah* without profound changes occurring in the Indian economic structure, changes which despite political rhetoric would not necessarily guarantee any improvement in the lives of Indian women as a whole in relation to men”.²¹

Purdah as was stated at the beginning of this paper is a visible (or invisible?) manifestation of the status of women in their society. In the two novels under scrutiny we see that it is above all the *purdah mentality* that dominates and stifles change within the confines of the purdah society. Let us now turn briefly to the more concrete aspects of purdah. It should be emphasised that far from serving to level social differences, purdah marks out and establishes status differences. A household in which purdah is observed is one that can afford to maintain it. A house that is large enough to be able to provide separate living quarters for men and women (the *mardana* and *zenana* respectively in a Muslim household) again in itself indicates a certain degree of wealth. By the same token the Muslim *burqa*, while it may appear to the outsider to be a unifying garment, can denote the region of origin, wealth and sophistication, all indicated through the use of certain styles of *burqa*, differing material and embroidery etc. As we have seen from the reports Jeffery relates, the very fact of the use of the *burqa* in itself indicates a certain status in society since the *burqa* is a cumbersome impossibility for those women who for economic reasons have to work outside the home engaged in manual work. The minority Muslim community that Huma Ahmed-Ghosh studied was so poor that since they had no property, dress was the sole status indicator to which they could have access. In their efforts to improve their status in the village (an example of Srinivas’s concept of “sanskritisation”, in the Muslim context known as “Ashrafisation”) they aspired to copy their more affluent Hindu neighbours’ customs. Interestingly, while maintaining their Muslim tradition of purdah they simultaneously adopted dowry practices, not part of the Muslim tradition.²² These Muslim women in effect now had the worst of both worlds. The tension between purdah and the loss of power, however, will be best illustrated by reference to the two literary texts chosen.

The way their authors choose to begin their novels sets the tone for their narratives and reveals right from the start their standpoint as regards the power structure of the societies they describe, both of which are based on purdah.

The day my aunt Abida moved from the *zenana* into the guest-room off the corridor that led to the men’s wing of the house, within call of her father’s room, we knew Baba Jan had not much longer to live.²³

²¹ JEFFERY 174-75.

²² Huma AHMED-GHOSH, “Preserving Identity: A Case Study of Palitpur,” *Forging Identities: Gender, Communities and the State in India*, ed. Zoya Hasan (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1994) 178.

²³ Attia HOSAIN, *Sunlight on a Broken Column* (New Delhi: Penguin India, 1992) 14. Page numbers refer to this edition, hereafter abbreviated as *SBC* and included in the text of the paper.

The mention of the zenana in the very first sentence immediately situates the novel within the context of purdah, while the notion of movement foresees a characteristic of the action which will chart the changing circumstances in India, determined by the historic events of the last years of the Raj, Partition and Independence, paralleled by the abandonment of purdah by many of the characters. Indeed the disintegration of the family is signalled by the imminent demise of the patriarch: he had not much longer to live, neither had their ways.

In contrast, the opening lines of *Inside the Haveli* situate the action within the town where the novel will be sited and look back to its past importance.

Udaipur was once the capital of the State of Mewar; now it is only a town like many other towns in Rajasthan. But the change in its status hasn't diminished its beauty, nor the air of mystery that hangs over what is now known as the 'Old City'.²⁴

The relevance of the reference to the 'Old City' will be seen through the action of the novel which is centred on a way of life that is part of the past. Mehta highlights the beauty and the mystery of the Old City just as her protagonist will increasingly come to admire and indeed revere qualities in the male upholders of the patriarchal system of the haveli, attributes that are remnants of the past and do not lend themselves to a changing present and future. The 'inside' of the title indicates moreover the sphere of action of the novel, almost exclusively centred within the walls of the haveli and furthermore, within its female quarters. The reader is left with an overriding impression of confinement, indeed of claustrophobia, through the accounts of the minutiae of day-to-day existence of the inhabitants of the zenana. The close links between the women of the haveli and their servants reflect the feudalism of Rajasthan. Among the servants there is a strict hierarchy, the most influential of them being those who adhere most strictly to the rules and etiquette of the haveli and who most respect and observe their traditions. There are few references to outside events and scant indicators of what is going on outside the haveli walls. All this is indicative of the immobility of the haveli system and of the reluctance of its members to incorporate any elements of change.

While the families of both these novels are representative of feudalism, *Sunlight on a Broken Column* is characterised by a much wider background canvas to the action of the novel.

The changes that occur within the family structure echo the fate of the most privileged inhabitants of Lucknow, and indeed of a large part of India, during the turbulent years of the political struggles that marked the end of the Raj and Partition leading up to Independence. As Jameela Begum observes, Hosain's novel

²⁴ Rama MEHTA, *Inside the Haveli* (London: Women's, 1994) 3. Page numbers refer to this edition, hereafter abbreviated as *I the H* and included in the text of the paper.

charts the “dissolution of the Indian psyche during partition days.”²⁵ The family is very much a part of local and indeed national politics. Political power changes hands from the British rulers and those who seconded their rule, to the new order. Accordingly, for some in *Sunlight on a Broken Column* their power diminishes and they have to make way for the upwardly mobile. In contrast, the inhabitants of the haveli remain inward looking, clinging to the vestiges of the lost power of their state in Rajasthan.

In both novels events are seen through the eyes of a young woman. Inevitably, the way women are brought up to regard their role colours their reactions to the society in which they are immersed. The Hindu ethos posits as the ideal a woman’s self-effacement, derived from the legends of Sita and Savitri and enshrined in the practices of the joint family system. This position is evidently in direct opposition to the Western feminist appeal to self-actualisation.²⁶ It is through self-abnegation that women “acquire acceptability within the household.”²⁷ This self-abnegation is best achieved by effacing any distinguishing features. Significantly, Geeta’s first impression of the women of the haveli when she arrives at the railway station is of singing women whose faces are covered. She later observes of the purdah women that “with their heads bent and their faces covered, everyone looked alike.” (*I the H* 112) Reticence and masking of feelings are further requirements for these women, the ideal being someone who unflinchingly obeys the rigid laws of decorum and etiquette prescribed for them. Geeta learns that it is considered unseemly for her to show affection publicly for her new-born baby, while haveli norms allow a husband to spend the night with his wife as long as he leaves her bedroom before daybreak. (*I the H* 112)²⁸ *Pativrata*, the ideal of Hindu womanhood, decrees that “the more restricted she has been the less she goes out, the more status and honour the household will have.”²⁹ The status of the haveli (status, it will be remembered, figures in the opening paragraph of the novel) is the paramount consideration of all its members. How to conserve it, and especially how it should not be laid open to criticism by others require constant recourse to decorum and etiquette that ensure the façade is unblemished. That the fine line between reticence and hypocrisy frequently becomes blurred appears to be of no consequence. Appearances are what matter and

²⁵ Jameela BEGUM, “Reconstructing Personal History: The Purdah in Twilight in Delhi and Sunlight on Broken Column,” *Separate Worlds: Studies of Purdah in South Asia*, ed. Jasbir Jain and Amina Amin (Delhi: Chanakya, 1995) 207.

²⁶ Lal MALASHRI, *The Law of the Threshold: Women Writers in Indian English* (Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 1995) 89.

²⁷ Nirja MISRA, “On the Portals of Change: An Analysis of Purdah Culture in Rama Mehta’s Inside the Haveli,” *Separate Worlds: Studies of Purdah in South Asia*, ed. Jasbir Jain and Amina Amin (Delhi: Chanakya, 1995) 71.

²⁸ We are reminded of Rushdie’s satirical “dormitory” in *Shame*, while in *Sunlight on a Broken Column* Leela’s country cousin Zainab describes men stealing up to their wives like thieves.

²⁹ MISRA 81.

appearances have to do with maintaining the trappings and rituals traditionally associated with their position of power. Geeta's mother-in-law frequently reminds her that her sole duty lies in serving her husband's family. Simone de Beauvoir's assertion that one is not born a woman but becomes one, finds its corollary in Hindu practice where a girl learns from an early age "that she is *paraya dhan* (another's property), her parents' responsibility till the day she is handed over to her rightful owners."³⁰ Hence the overriding importance of marriage: how a woman may be as an individual or what her professional life may entail are completely subordinate to who she marries.

The ideal of self-abnegation is ever-present in *Sunlight on a Broken Column* and best personified in the figure of the protagonist Leela's Aunt Abida. Her life is dedicated to tending to the needs of her father and upon his death her brother swiftly marries her to an old man unable and unwilling to value her refinement and education. Locked in this loveless marriage, Abida is regarded with suspicion by her uneducated family-in-law simply because she is educated. Nevertheless, she has no hesitation in reminding Leela: "You must learn that your 'self' is of little importance. It is only through service to others that you can fulfil your duty." (*SBC* 252) There is no irony here for although Abida, cultivated and refined is unlike the illiterate haveli women in this respect, she shares with them her overriding concern to uphold the family's good name. The guidelines of her belief in the supreme importance of upholding family honour are established early in the novel:

My child, there are certain rules of conduct that must be observed in this world without question. You have a great responsibility. You must never forget the traditions of your family no matter to what outside influences you may be exposed. [...] I do not wish anyone to point a finger at you, because it will be a sign of my failure. Never forget the family into which you were born. (*SBC* 38)

Abida's recognition of the existence of outside influences that potentially threaten their way of life distinguishes her life experience from that of the haveli women. She insists on Zahara's presence in the family discussion of a possible husband thereby incurring the anger of her brother's kinsman, but at the same time she explicitly acknowledges the limits of her influence although not seeking to alter them.

"I have neither the power, nor the wish, because I am not of these times. But I am living in them. The walls of this house are high enough, but they do not enclose a cemetery. The girl cannot choose her own husband, she has neither the upbringing nor the opportunity..."

³⁰ Rani DHARKARI. "Marriage as Purdah: Fictional Rendering of a Social Reality", *Separate Worlds: Studies of Purdah in South Asia*, ed. Jain Jasbir and Amina Amin (Delhi: Chanakya, 1995) 50.

“Would you have it otherwise?” he interrupted.

“But,” she ignored him, “she can be present while we make the choice, hear our arguments, know our reasons, so that later on she will not doubt our capabilities and question our decisions. That is the least I can do.” (*SBC* 21)

Abida’s understanding of changing times does not lead her to deviate from the path of duty prescribed for her. Indeed, the female inhabitants of the family house Ashiana of her generation, all of whom are imprisoned in their purdah mentality, never adapt to the changes that the political upheaval which surrounds them demand of them. As we saw with the case of female infanticide it is women themselves, the strongest upholders of the restrictions of purdah, who are most zealous in maintaining it. Anita Desai, who conceded that younger readers find her characters “completely helpless women, hopeless women,” made just this point about India in an interview. “I think that this is something you have to face about Indian society. Women are as responsible as men for those old orthodoxies and traditions being kept alive through the generations.”³¹

A similar outlook can be found in the haveli. As has been mentioned, Geeta is never allowed to forget that “her first and in fact only duty was to serve her husband’s family.” (*I the H* 17) Geeta, coming from a liberal Bombay family with a completely different life-style to that of the haveli, is at a serious disadvantage in having to learn the behaviour considered appropriate which women bought up in the haveli have observed since they were children. Her mother-in-law reminds her that “the women are critical because you are still clumsy. I want to show them that even an educated girl can be moulded. That I was not wrong in selecting you as the wife of my only son.” (*I the H* 30) An interesting question is why Geeta was chosen for the only son of the haveli. I believe that her growing admiration and reverence for the “dignity”, “the ancient house”, “the ancestral dignity of the haveli” can be attributed to a certain feeling of social inferiority that, in spite of herself, insidiously acts on her. Evidence of class considerations surfaces when in one of her intermittent surges of rebelliousness Geeta reflects that there is no reason for her to feel inferior: “What if I cannot trace my ancestry beyond my grandfather?” (*I the H* 100) Compared to the “great traditions” of the haveli her family are *nouveau riche*. A way of being accepted as not inferior is to take on board those traditions, and that is what she does, although it is of course true that she pioneers education for the servant girls of the haveli. Her mother-in-law is illiterate and Geeta has to buy her own books through her husband; the “servants chided her for this extravagance and she knew that they were echoing the sentiments of her mother-in-law.” (*I the H* 52) Geeta adopts purdah because she has no alternative but over the years becomes increasingly moulded by the restrictions which it imposes, reflecting the immobility

³¹ In Feroza JUSSAWALLA and Reed Way DASENBROK, eds. *Interviews with Writers of the Post-Colonial World* (Jackson: UP of Mississippi 1992) 165.

ity of the social structure in the haveli: she acquires much of the purdah mentality. In *Sunlight on a Broken Column*, by contrast, there is a constant sense of change outside the walls of Ashiana affecting its inhabitants' lives. The older members crave the security of their age-old way of life; great family upheavals occur when the younger generation depart from many of their sacrosanct traditions.

But when is tradition an anchor or a safety net and when does it become a hampering factor? Tarlo offers a useful distinction, categorising as traditional what we consider "relevant to our present and our future". The obverse, what we "dismiss as irrelevant to contemporary life" she designates as old-fashioned. In these terms to call things "traditional is therefore a means of implying their authenticity and justifying their continued existence."³² In *Sunlight on a Broken Column* we can distinguish between those for whom tradition cannot be shaken off, who will inevitably be tied to a dying past, just as are the inhabitants of the haveli, and the more upwardly mobile whose life-styles will change and who will adapt to changing circumstances. Yet Leela is not unreservedly in favour of the change, whose ethics she questions and whose appearances she challenges. The family of Leela's friend Nadira (who will eventually marry Saleem) is described in the following terms:

Nadira's family were comparative newcomers to our city; they had come from the neighbouring province of the Punjab only twenty years ago. Her father was a doctor, known to be clever, but said to be so grasping that, before starting his treatment, one had to decide between dying of bankruptcy or the disease. After he had become successful they moved from their small house in a socially inferior part of the city, to a large house on the Mall. Begum Waheed came out of purdah, began to call herself 'Begum', and sent Nadira to a convent. (*SBC*, 125-26)

They are the new values. The opportunistic approach to life is in direct contrast to the ethics of the old-established families who depend on the crutch of their traditions. After Partition Nadira and Saleem make a new life for themselves in Pakistan, and as Hosain bitterly remarks, from then on it was easier for them to visit any part of the world than their family home in India.

In the mid-thirties Leela's cousin Zahara marries an up and coming civil servant. For her, apparently a new life begins as she leaves Ashiana and plays the wifely role that corresponds to her new situation. When husband and wife visit Ashiana for the first time after their marriage, Leela recognises that in spite of what she sees, her cousin's new outward appearance is merely another manifestation of her purdah mentality. "Zahra had changed very much in her appearance, speech, and mannerisms. I knew she had not changed within herself. She was now playing the part of the perfect modern wife as she had once played the part of a dutiful purdah girl." (*SBC* 140) So, evidently it is not enough to discard purdah.

³² TARLO 317.



Leela's Uncle Hamid becomes the head of the family upon his father's death. An admirer of the British he does all in his power to ape their ways. In manner he is distant and cold, reflecting the behaviour of the British, and deeply dislikes the Indian extended family system. "Its entanglements, unreasoning restrictions, unreasonable demands and lack of privacy had made him admire and adopt the ordered, individual, Western way of living." (SBC167) Yet at the same time he cannot shed the authoritarianism of his upbringing while by turning his back on the old ways, he antagonises the members of the clan. He and his wife Saira lead an extremely active social life. Saira we learn "was Uncle Hamid's echo, tall and handsome, dominated by him, aggressive with others." The extent of Hamid's power over his wife, brought up in a strict orthodox middle-class purdah family, is revealed by the fact that he "had her *groomed* by a succession of English 'lady-companions.'" (emphasis added). Yet again Leela is aware of the discrepancy between outward appearances and the inward purdah mentality. "Sometimes her smart saris, discreet make-up, waved hair, cigarette-holder and high-heeled shoes seemed to me like fancy dress." (SBC 87) For all her apparent sophistication, Saira is never able to address her husband by his name, in accordance with Indian tradition. Hamid enters the political arena and eventually stands for the party that supports the *Taluqdars* the large landholders, the class to which he belongs. He justifies his political stance by asserting that *Taluqdars* "have ancient rights and privileges, given by a special charter" which they have "a right to safeguard" (SBC 231). That Hamid is part of a dying class is made clear when in a political argument with his son Saleem he expostulates: "I am part of feudalism and proud to be. I shall fight for it. It is my heritage —and yours." (SBC 234) Although he wins a seat in the first election for which he stands as a candidate, the tide rapidly turns and he ends his life embittered and worn out by a struggle that he was doomed to lose. "Politically he had fought a losing battle against new forces that were slowly and inexorably destroying the rights and privileges in which he believed." (SBC 282)

Similarly, his wife Saira whose "life was a reflection of her husband's as she struggled to secure her position of leadership among women," is threatened by the new forces that aspire to the power she has held "in the women's organisations she and her friends had so far dominated." (SBC 225) Saira is truly representative of the purdah mentality. Never is this more apparent than in her hypocrisy and slavish adherence to convention and her prudishness in anything to do with sexual matters. Attitudes towards love or any outward demonstrations of affection are treated humorously in the novel. The Raja of Amirpur, a great social beacon instigates a new fashion reserving all the balcony seats in the local cinema to which he takes his guests after his parties. Leela observes with amusement how her elders react. "During every love scene and at each kiss their embarrassment became palpable even in the dark. My aunt usually reacted with a spell of coughing and buried her face in her handkerchief." (SBC 202) The essence of this prudishness, however, is shown to be more of a social convention than anything else when Saira disgustedly declares, "[l]ove? No one in decent families talks of love'." (SBC 180)

One of the most perceptive criticisms of purdah is that by making such an issue of the problematic nature of women's sexuality in society it in fact serves to

enhance its importance. Leela, who is intelligent and questioning, puts the paradoxical nature of the attitude towards sexuality very clearly. "A thing can't be shameful at one time and not another, for one person and not another. Besides, if it is such a shameful business being married and having children, why talk of nothing but marriage from the moment a girl is born?" (SBC 105) The crux of the matter is, as the non purdah Parsi Mrs. Wadia patronisingly observes, "purdah is no insurance against immorality." (SBC 132) Purdah, except in appearance, does not achieve what it sets out to do.

Just as purdah proves inadequate in this respect, so too is it inappropriate to social change. At the end of the novel the implications of loss of power are revealed in Saira's bitterness.

She could not face the fact that Kemal had no alternative but to sell Ashiana. It was part of her refusal to accept the fact that her world had gone for ever. She had clothed herself in remembered assurances of power and privilege just as the story-book Emperor had donned his non-existent clothes, but there was no one to make her see the nakedness of her illusions. Traditional courtesies had restrained everyone. She only knew that power and privilege still existed, that position still counted; except that others, whom she had once patronised, possessed them. (SBC 275)

Significantly, Saira in her old age sheds the appearance of modernity so carefully cultivated for and by her husband, and retreats into what she had never ceased to be. She and the members of her circle are shown to be "women whose minds remained smothered in the burqas they had outwardly discarded, and men who met women socially but mentally relegated them to harems and zenanas." (SBC 207)

Leela speaks of the restrictions applied to her as crippling her actions and her mind. (SBC 265) Yet she is no revolutionary. She admits she had always dreamt of "change without chaos, of birth without pain." (SBC 278) India was "born" amidst chaos that caused great pain, but Leela contrives to adapt to the changes. Not adhering to the purdah mentality is a major factor in achieving the transition. She does not associate herself with the power structure and consequently can break free from the mental constrictions that bind the members of her family who cannot tolerate their loss of power and cannot or will not abandon the feudal cast of mind and the purdah mentality.

It is not clear exactly when the action of *Inside the Haveli* takes place, but probably somewhat later than *Sunlight on a Broken Column*, during the fifties. However, the atmosphere and the attitudes of the haveli seem not to have changed over hundreds of years. Geeta says of the women of the haveli that, "they are rooted in ignorance and suspicion," (*I the H* 137) which is as it has always been. Rather than observing the changes in the power structure of society through the changes in the household as in *Sunlight on a Broken Column*, Rama Mehta gives the reader a vision of the decadent quality of the society she depicts through images of haveli life and of the haveli itself. Although both novels depict feudal societies in decline, Leela, though nostalgic for the graceful ways of old, can detach herself, whereas Geeta

becomes increasingly mesmerised by the men of the household. Her maid Dhapu warns her not to fall foul of the women of the haveli since they are “all mean”; in contrast the men “are generous and understanding. They look beyond our little world.” (*I the H* 104) This appreciation by her maid is startlingly similar to the way Geeta comes to view them.

Paradoxically, she has virtually no contact with these men. Their lives are conducted mainly in their own apartments; it is “not considered dignified” for men to come to the women’s apartments “during the day except when women had to be consulted on some family matter.” (*I the H* 22) However, as she early observes, “their presence was felt everywhere in the haveli. Nothing was done without consulting them. It was around their desires that the whole routine of the haveli revolved.” (*I the H* 19) Geeta is especially impressed with her father-in-law, but two years after her marriage she has never once spoken either to him or to his father. Ten years later, however, matters have progressed to the extent that she is “allowed to sit in his [her father-in-law’s] presence when no outsiders were present and even talk to him directly.” (*I the H* 179) She is overawed by what she considers the greatness of the men of the family. When new to the haveli she “trespasse[s]” (*I the H* 19) into the men’s apartments and gazes at the portraits of her husband’s ancestors who “seemed to be looking down as guardians of the haveli and observing how succeeding generations were living up to the traditions bequeathed to them.” (*I the H* 20) Two years later she observes from the ladies’ gallery the reception held to celebrate the birth of her child and muses: “[e]ven though Udaipur was no longer a feudal state the traditions of Mewar seemed safe in the hands of those stern looking men, all of whom seemed so composed, so determined and so refined. [...] How could she allow little discomforts to blind her to the great traditions of the family?” (*I the H* 40)

Mehta establishes an analogy between tradition, which she says is concerned primarily “with upholding family customs and ties,” and the qualities intrinsic to a haveli. “Tradition was like a fortress *protecting* them from the outside world, giving them *security* and a *sense of superiority*.” (*I the H* 114, emphases added.) Just as the haveli protects them from the outside world, so too does purdah shield them. They are protected from change, given a (false) sense of security and can assert their own feelings of the power that the knowledge of their past greatness confers on them.

Although there is a great social divide between the landowner class of the havelis and their servants and the villagers, nevertheless, the importance of tradition is common to all of them. Tradition may take the form of the rules of decorum and etiquette that govern the purdah restrictions and decree who may go where and when, who may speak to whom, or the strict veiling that is the lot of all women. Similarly, tradition rules the interaction between the family members of the haveli. Geeta’s husband Ajay is gentle and considerate. Understanding her need to be able to see more of him than custom admits, he finds excuses to go to her apartments, but inevitably these are “short and hurried.” (*I the H* 22) Yet however kind a husband he may be, the conjugal bond is weaker than the filial one, and Ajay “was not prepared to do anything to challenge his father’s authority.” (*I the H* 22) Notwithstanding this, Geeta is surprised that his relationship with his parents is one of great

distance; “he talked to his parents as if they were dignitaries with whom he could take no liberties.” (*I the H* 32)

The villagers too are ruled by virtually the same traditions. When Lakshmi’s prospective in-laws come to the haveli they tell the head maid Pari about their lives: “why it was important for them to abide by family customs, even if that meant getting into debt. Their only support came from relatives and if they did not keep up the traditions they were afraid they would lose the family’s approval.” (*I the H* 161) The villagers like the haveli owners “can’t afford to displease their caste community.” (*I the H* 186) Money, as Pari explains, “is not the only thing that matters to the poor, it is keeping to family customs that matters most.” (*I the H* 186)

The village women too, are studiously veiled. As we have seen, what distinguishes the haveli is its strict division of the living quarters into mardana and zenana. The vulnerability of this set up, however, is seen with the successive descriptions of its decay that chart its owners’ steady loss of power. Through the years we read how the “whitewashed walls were a little more yellow; the mildew a little more widespread [...] the iron gate had begun to corrode with moisture [...] the haveli stood firm as if good for another hundred years.” (*I the H* 85) An element of doubt is introduced by the “as if” and a further five years show their toll with the wooden door becoming “more patchy and the marble more yellow; the filigree around the scalloped balcony [...] broken in more places, destroying the continuity of the design”. (*I the H* 171) Since in the interim a number of servants have died and have not been able to be replaced, there are no longer enough of them to see to the daily upkeep of the haveli, leading to the closing up of part of it. The closing of a part of the haveli symbolises the decline in the way of life of its inhabitants. When they can no longer afford to maintain a given number of servants purdah will no longer be possible, and the whole haveli system will be undermined. Loss of power will bring with it an end to purdah.

While neither author explicitly derides purdah, it is the purdah mentality that is revealed to be the chief factor that impedes a relatively untraumatic transition to social change. Resistance to change is as sterile as the closing off of bodies and minds to forces in society that are ultimately more powerful than the immobility purdah represents.

WORKS CITED

- AHMED-GHOSH, Huma. "Preserving Identity: A Case Study of Palitpur." *Forging Identities: Gender, Communities and the State in India*. Ed. Zoya Hasan. Boulder CO.: Westview, 1994. 169-187.
- BEGUM, Jameela. "Reconstructing Personal History: The Purdah in Twilight in Delhi and Sunlight on a Broken Column." *Margins of Erasure: Purdah in the Subcontinental Novel in English*. Ed. Jasbir Jain and Amina Amin. New Delhi: Sterling, 1995. 206-215.
- DHARKAR, Rani. "Marriage as Purdah: Fictional Rendering of a Social Reality." *Margins of Erasure: Purdah in the Subcontinental Novel in English*. Ed. Jasbir Jain and Amina Amin. New Delhi: Sterling, 1995. 49-59.
- HASAN, Zoya, ed. *Forging Identities: Gender, Communities and the State in India*. Boulder CO.: Westview, 1994.
- HOSSAIN, Attia. *Sunlight on a Broken Column*. 1961. New Delhi: Penguin, 1992.
- JAIN, Jasbir and Amina AMIN, eds. *Margins of Erasure: Purdah in the Subcontinental Novel in English*. New Delhi: Sterling, 1995.
- JACOBSON, Doranne. "Hidden Faces: Hindu and Muslim Purdah in a Central Indian Village." Diss. Columbia University, 1970.
- JEFFERY, Patricia. *Frogs in a Well: Indian Women in Purdah*. London: Zed, 1979.
- JUSSAWALLA, Feroza and Reed WAY DASENBROCK, eds. *Interviews with Writers of the Post-Colonial World*. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1992.
- MADAN, T.N. "The Hindu Woman at Home." *Indian Women, from Purdah to Modernity*. Ed. Bal Ram Nanda. New Delhi: Vikas, 1975. 67-86
- MALASHRI, Lal. *The Law of the Threshold: Women Writers in Indian English*. Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 1995.
- MEHTA, Rama. *Inside the Haveli*. 1977 London: Women's, 1994.
- MISRA, Nirja. "On the Portals of Change: An Analysis of Purdah Culture in Rama Mehta's Inside the Haveli." *Margins of Erasure: Purdah in the Subcontinental Novel in English*. Ed. Jasbir Jain and Amina Amin. New Delhi: Sterling, 1995. 71-82.
- NANDY, Ashis. "Woman Versus Womanliness: An Essay in Speculative Psychology." *Indian Women, from Purdah to Modernity*. Ed. Bal Ram Nanda. New Delhi: Vikas, 1975. 146-160.
- PAPANEK, Hanna and Gail MINAULT, eds. *Separate Worlds: Studies of Purdah in South Asia*. Delhi: Chanakya, 1982.
- PARAMESWARAN, Uma. "Purdah in Salman Rushdie, Attia Hosain and Rama Mehta." *Margins of Erasure: Purdah in the Subcontinental Novel in English*. Ed. Jasbir Jain and Amina Amin. New Delhi: Sterling, 1995. 33-48.

SHARMA, Ursula. "Women and Their Affines: The Veil as a Symbol of Separation." *Man* 13 (1978): 218-33.

TARLO, Emma. *Clothing Matters: Dress and Identity in India*. London: Hurst, 1996.

