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**THE DIALECTICS OF THE PURDAH:
AN ANALYSIS OF THREE LITERARY TEXTS**

Dissertation submitted to Jawaharlal Nehru University in partial
fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the Degree of

MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY

By

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CERTIFICATE

This is to certify the dissertation entitled “**THE DIALECTICS OF THE PURDAH: AN ANALYSIS OF THREE LITERARY TEXTS**”, submitted by Sabah Hamid, in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the award of the degree of **Master of Philosophy** of the University, is to the best of my knowledge an original work and may be placed before the examiners for evaluation.

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This dissertation entitled "THE DIALECTICS OF THE PURDAH: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THREE LITERARY TEXTS", submitted by me for the award of the degree of Master of philosophy is an original and has not been submitted so far in part or in full, for any degree or diploma of any University.


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Introduction

Behind the Veil

A work of literature invariably reflects the personal or cultural experiences of its author. It is no wonder, therefore, that Indian women writers invariably write about the segregated world of women and its functioning. The purdah, seen here as the boundary that demarcates the inner from the outside world, has been quite extensively written about.

The Cambridge International Dictionary of English defines purdah as “the condition of following the custom, found in some Muslim and Hindu cultures, of women not allowing their faces to be seen by male strangers, either by staying in a special part of the house or by wearing a covering over their faces.” The word ‘purdah’, however, has come to denote almost universally not just the veil that women are enclosed in but also the dividing line between tradition and modernity. The purdah is the space that originates from the physical arrangements of domestic order, but extends to the metaphorical notions that create totems and taboos of human conduct. It is seen as a real as well as a symbolic bar marking a critical transition.

The home, with its traditional notions, is understood to be a place of nurture, family solidarity, domestic ethics – in all of which the woman plays (or is supposed to play) a determining role. The world outside is, traditionally, the ‘unknown’ to the woman. According to patriarchal mores, she is ‘protected’ from the outside world.

The Indian woman, as Malashri Lal points out in *The Law of the Threshold*, is most often seen as struggling with her “articulation of a problematic interface between the familiar home base and a world of possibilities beyond the ‘known’.”¹ The three texts studied here belong to different genres: one is a novel, one a collection of short stories and

one an anthology of poems. The writers, however, are all three women and to some extent the writing of each has some autobiographical content. All three texts are examples of the conflicting dialogue taking place in the space women are taught to call their own.

The first text is Rama Mehta's *Inside the Haveli*, a sociological study of the Rajput women of Rajasthan. Mehta, who lived part of married life in Rajasthan, writes about the acculturation of a modern woman to her life behind the purdah. The second text is a collection of short stories by Ismat Chughtai, Urdu's Grand Dame. The translation I have chosen is *The Quilt & Other Stories*, ably translated from Urdu by Tahira Naqvi and Syeda S Hameed. The third text is a book of poems by Imtiaz Dharker, suitably titled *Purdah*. Each of the three texts deals with issues concerning women, talks about women and to women, though the approach is varied.

The three texts agree in principle about the need for a woman to find an identity and attain selfhood. The treatment, though, is different. Rama Mehta, for instance, believes that the Indian woman should learn to live with the conditions specific to her, and if she does so instead of feeling sorry for herself and constantly complaining about her condition, she can live a meaningful life. She is one of the writers that Naresh K Jain classifies as questioning traditional values but at the same time looking for an identity within it.²

Ismat Chughtai, on the other hand, recognises very well the enormity of the task women face in dealing with and rejecting the conditioned response to patriarchy, and yet she constantly expresses her lack of conviction at submitting to a predestined fate. Her depiction of the hidden world of women is startlingly clear, but at the same time she

manages to convey her disapproval of the rules and regulations imposed on women. Allowing oneself to be subject to the mores of patriarchy is to her almost as big a crime as the imposition of the rules themselves.

Imtiaz Dharker also bemoans the apparent inevitability with which women bow down to the rules imposed on them. The protagonists of her poems do not live within the boundaries of purdah out of a sense of conviction, and yet, they desist from openly rebelling against the norm. Dharker also demonstrates the use of religion as a tool to subjugate women.

There are obvious differences in the three texts, the most obvious one being the one of genre. The other difference, maybe almost as obvious, is religion. The choice of texts was a deliberate one: the three books, though not representative of the vast literature written by women on the subject, at least demonstrate that all genres have been concerned with it. Two, religion emerges as important in the books only as a mean of making women believe that they are subservient to men. Even more important, the differences in the purdah notwithstanding (Muslim women wear the *burqah* while the Rajput ones draw the *ghungat*), it is the purdah *mentality* that emerges as more damaging to the woman. Also, purdah is seen to be as much an economic phenomenon as a religious construct: there is, for instance, a distinct difference in the degree of purdah observed by women of different social stratas.

The texts are also separated by time and geography, but it hardly seems to matter whether it is Chughtai writing in pre and post independent India, or Mehta in the Rajasthan of the seventies, or Dharker just more than a decade ago in the sub-continent or Britain. The overall concerns of the texts appear to be the same.

There are a lot of common threads running through the three texts. It is not within the scope of this study to explore all of them, but I have tried to pick out the most pertinent.

The first chapter deals with the choices women face in dealing with the restrictions placed on them because of their gender. In fact, the chapter tries to explore whether there are any choices available at all: why do almost all narratives concerning women conclude with the woman either giving in and living respectfully, or defying tradition and paying for it? The theme of repercussions is discussed further in Chapter 3, where the fate of the 'transgressors' is discussed in detail.

The first chapter, as mentioned above, assesses the various choices for a woman: to accept, question or reject. The veil - the purdah - is seen here as both literal and metaphorical. The women protagonists in the different texts are either subjected to wearing the veil, or placed under numerous restrictions, or both. Mehta's Geeta tries right from the beginning to adhere, and the writer seems to support the decision. Chughtai on the other hand, does not support the docile acceptance by women of the restrictions placed on them, but understands the enormity of the decision to choose a different path. Dharker writes sensitive, and at the same time, often incisive poetry, indicting both religion and man for woman's plight.

The three texts share several concerns, the search for identity being one of them. The second chapter explores the almost impossible task facing women of establishing an identity of their own when they are, all the time, seen as the 'other'. As Simone de Beauvoir put it, "Humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him: she is not regarded as an autonomous being."³ One would actually have

thought that it would be easy to dismiss the presence of men in a text dealing with 'woman's space', but it is not so. It is around the actions of men that the plot of the narrative revolves, with women mostly being the passive observers/sufferers. The second chapter deals with the identity crises a woman faces throughout her life, as well as the different ways the three writers articulate the dilemma.

The world is seen to be divided into the outer and the inner worlds, the domain of the man and the woman, respectively. As Partha Chatterjee writes in *The Nation and its Fragments, Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*, "The world is a treacherous terrain of the pursuit of material interests, where practical conditions reign supreme. It is also typically the domain of the male. The home in its essence must remain unaffected by the profane activities of the material world – and woman is its representation."⁴ Men have, throughout the ages, partaken of both worlds. Women, on the other hand, have been expected to inhabit only the one world contained by the boundaries that demarcate the home. For a woman, a step over the boundary is an act of transgression. A woman who steps out of the set parameters defies the norms and is henceforth barred from re-entering the 'sacred' domestic space. Unlike the man, she has to choose between the two worlds, and in case she chooses to step out, the choice is an irreversible one.

Chapter 3 defines exactly what is seen as an act of transgression, and the repercussions a woman faces for committing it.

The last chapter examines the inability of the woman to express herself aloud. One of the first hurdles that women have to overcome in their achievement of selfhood is finding words to express themselves. Only when one is able to articulate one's predicament can a solution be found

to it. Most Indian texts show women 'talking' to themselves, indulging in a lifelong monologue. Our society teaches women to stay silent and not voice their view right from childhood and this lesson becomes part of the Indian woman's psyche. We have to learn to substitute the language of silence with words if we are to find an identity of our own.

It has been the endeavor of feminists all across the world to come up with a narrative that women can call their own. As pointed out by Jasbir Jain⁵, the problem is double faceted: how to step out of the framework defined by patriarchal values; and how to identify and create a tradition of their own.

Among the three texts studied here, at least one is quite openly against creating a new tradition, but ironically, it is the only text that advocates anything at all. *Inside the Haveli* suggests a sort of a middle path between tradition and modernity for the Indian woman. The other two texts depict the woman's situation very well, but do not advocate a clear-cut solution to it. They do, however, agree on the fact change will not take place until the woman herself decides to take a hand in it.

Ironically, it is perhaps the woman standing on the threshold who perhaps feels the most isolated, as she rethinks one last time the decision to step over it. As Lal⁶ points out, history and family traditions offer no role models by which she can read her possible future in the world beyond. If she does step over it though, whatever her individual future, women come that much closer to discarding the veil.

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¹ Lal, Malashri. *The Law of the Threshold*. (Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 1995), p. 3

² Jain, Naresh K. *Women in Indo-Anglican Fiction*. (Delhi: Manohar Publishers, 1998)

³ Beauvoir, Simone de. *The Second Sex*. Trans. Parshley, H M. (New Delhi: Alfred A Knopf, 1986).

⁴ Chatterjee, Partha. *The Nation and its Fragments, Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*. (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 120

⁵ Jain, Jasbir. 'Gender and Narrative Strategy'. Ed. Dinesh, Kamini. *Between Spaces of Silence*. (New Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 1994)

⁶ Lal, Malashri. *The Law of the Threshold*. (Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 1995), p. 18

Chapter 1

To Accept, Question or Reject

There are, simplistically speaking, three ways in which a woman faced with the prospect of living her life in purdah can react: she can accept without question the fate meted out to her, she can protest against the unfairness of it all but not take any steps to change the status quo, or she can vocally as well as through her actions rebel. The three texts studied here could actually be classified accordingly, but it is really not so simple. One, the protagonists, and the authors of the texts, have quite an equivocal attitude towards purdah. Two, the end result does not always match the attitude displayed in the writing.

The first text, Rama Mehta's *Inside the Haveli*¹, is basically an aesthetically presented sociological study of the status of women in Rajasthan. Her own experiences during her study of the women of the Oswal community, as recounted in her essay 'From Purdah to Modernity'², seem to have impelled her to write this novel. Srinivasa Iyengar in *Indian Writing in English* calls it "a sensitive piece of realistic fiction, even an authentic sociological study"³.

In her article 'From Purdah to Modernity'⁴, Rama Mehta wrote about the changing social manners and mores of the women of the Oswal community of Udaipur. *Inside the Haveli*, in contrast, is about the acculturation of a 'modern' woman to the conventions of the haveli. The protagonist, Geeta is a young girl brought up and educated in Bombay. She gets married, according to her parents' wishes, to Ajay, the scion of a respectable wealthy family of Udaipur. The tone of the narrative is set right at the outset: Geeta's parents, though having given her a 'modern' upbringing, arrange for

her to get married into a traditional family. They are seen to be worried, but not about Geeta's adjustment to a new way of life, but rather about the orthodox family accepting Geeta as a daughter-in-law. There is no debate, no weighing of options by Geeta's parents regarding the match. They do however pass a week in anxiety before the final 'approval' of Geeta is conveyed to them.

In between getting her trousseau ready, Geeta's mother offers her some advice:

"Keep your head covered; never argue with your elders; respect your mother-in-law and do as she tells you. Don't talk too much."⁵

Concisely put, there is actually just one thing the mother advises her daughter to do: comply. The advice is that of a woman experienced in the ways of the world to one who is just embarking on the journey, given perhaps because the older woman knows that the acceptance of things as they are is the only way to be accepted into the social fabric. Ironically, though Geeta smiles at her mother then, one can by the end of the book imagine her passing on the same advice to her own daughter.

Immediately after her marriage, Geeta travels to Udaipur to join her husband's family. The journey is not just geographical: Geeta moves from an open society to a cloistered one. Symbolically speaking, the journey is from modernity to tradition. Having lived in a city and attended a co-educational college, Geeta is not accustomed to a society where she cannot show her face even to the

other women and where she meets her husband only by night. It is only to be expected that she would have trouble settling in, but surprisingly, she doesn't seem to have too much of a problem adjusting.

Right after arriving in Udaipur, Geeta is isolated from her husband, the only person she knows in that place and is thrown into the company of unfamiliar women. The division of the haveli into two parts, one for the men and the other for the women, effectively separates them, at least for the daytime. Geeta hardly ever expresses aloud her lack of conviction in this system and then never vehemently. In fact, she is constantly concerned that she is taking too long adjusting to the ways of the haveli. There is hardly ever any questioning of the *ways* themselves. She is more worried about the people of the haveli judging her unfavourably rather than devising means to change her situation.

Geeta initially has a vague hope of moving away from the haveli with her husband, but when the opportunity presents itself, her husband refuses to take it. Ironically, Geeta does not even insist on having her point of view being heard. Instead of trying to reason with her husband, or even lodge a token protest, Geeta willingly accepts the decision:

“I don't want to leave Udaipur now. The haveli has made me a willing prisoner within its walls. How stupid I was not to see all it holds.”⁶

Clearly then, the protagonist and the text is one in which the purdah is accepted. At the beginning of the narrative, Geeta finds the practice of purdah strange and one she is not accustomed to. However, the fact that she has to observe it nevertheless does not strike her as unfair. The purdah is from the first something she sees as having to get used to. Her constant endeavour is to blend in, not stand out.

Geeta's growing fascination for the haveli leads to an increasing acquiescence to convention. By the end of the novel, Geeta's acculturation is so complete that she withdraws active opposition to getting her thirteen-year-old daughter married. Initially denouncing the custom of child marriage, Geeta in no time at all regrets her "hasty words" and reasons out why the match could be a good one. Her attitude towards the marriage till the very end of the novel is ambiguous, but it is clear that she is open to being convinced. Here then, we see not just an acceptance of traditional mores, but a perpetuation of them.

Ironically, the very person who is given no choice but to accept tradition is the one who goes on to perpetuate it. One is left to wonder if this is strength of conviction or an acceptance of defeat by the individual.

The second text, a collection of short stories by Ismat Chughtai, *The Quilt & Other Stories*⁷, has a number of female protagonists, each one trying to come to terms with her fate. In her writing, Ismat Chughtai mostly concentrated on what she knew best: the middle

class Muslim household. The bulk of her work reflects a deep and abiding preoccupation with themes related to women and their status. Her 'heroines' are realistically drawn portraits of women whose reaction to the restrictions placed on them varies from compliance to protest and to defiance in a few cases.

The most famous, or rather infamous, story of Chughtai is undeniably 'The Quilt' (Lihaaf). For most people, the name of Ismat Chughtai brings to mind the writer who brought into sharp focus a lesbian relationship. But there is more to Chughtai than that one story. In fact, she did not write 'The Quilt' to air her views about alternate sexuality, but rather to take the reader beyond the veil, into the zenana, and show her the plight of the women languishing there. The story is about a begum whose husband's negligence drives her to find emotional and physical solace in the arms of her maid.

Most of Chughtai's stories talk about the plight of women forced to lead a secluded life. These stories implicate men as perpetuating the purdah for their own benefit, but at the same time Chughtai does not absolve women of the blame entirely. Quite a few of her women suffer because they refuse to take destiny into their own hands. In 'The Veil', the protagonist is a woman who is married off at fourteen and is an eighty year old virgin when her husband dies. The story revolves around the man's insistence that she lift her own veil and her timidity at doing so. So deeply ingrained is the injunction of not voluntarily showing her face to the world, and of letting the man make the first move, that the woman cannot even obey with her

husband's last wishes. Every time she lifts her hands to remove the veil, something seems to hold her back.

Apart from not complying with her husband's command, Goribi's fault is that she is beautiful. Her husband, conscious of his own dark skin, assumes she is arrogant and will therefore not look at her face until she shows it herself. We see a similar situation in 'The Eternal Vine'. The protagonist, Rukhsana, is barely sixteen when she is married off to a forty-year-old man. The husband is at first enamoured of his young beautiful wife, but with his age catching up, he starts resenting her youth. The woman is accused of being unfaithful, of having liaisons with younger men. Rukhsana, instead of defending herself, just retreats into herself and "prays for her hair to turn grey".

One of the most poignant stories Chughtai ever wrote is perhaps *The Wedding Shroud*. The story comprises of three women protagonists: an impoverished mother, and her two daughters. The plot revolves around a male relative of marriageable age coming to stay with the family for a few days. Though there has been nothing said verbally, he is instantly assumed to be a prospective groom for the elder daughter Kubra. The impoverished household works to please him, all to no avail. All he does is make disparaging remarks about the food, of which he consumes enormous quantities, and make suggestive overtures to the younger daughter. He leaves when his parents fix his marriage with a 'suitable' girl. Kubra, already suffering from consumption, cannot recover from the 'shame' and

dies. The last scene of the story shows the mother making, not a wedding suit, but a shroud for her daughter.

The story presents with clarity the world of impoverished gentility that exists beyond the veil. Society, man and woman are implicated alike in the telling of the tale.

Ismat Chughtai's central concern, Krishna Baldev Vaid, says, is "to tell the truth as she sees it"⁸. Her stories, indeed almost all her writings, can be seen as a social commentary of the world she lived in. So we see her heroines either accepting their fate or questioning it, but the end result seems to be almost always the same: The women learn to live with the constraints placed on them. Chughtai, though a rebel who refused to wear the veil and to conform throughout her life, nevertheless portrays her heroines as ultimately learning to live within the constructed norms.

The third text is a collection of poems by Imtiaz Dharker, aptly titled *Purdah and Other Poems*.⁹ The very first poem sets the tone of the collection:

One day they said
she was old enough to learn some shame
She found it came quite naturally¹⁰

Dharker's poems are all written from the perspective of a woman narrator, a narrator who is immured in the space allocated to her. They are women who 'choose' to live in purdah – with all its



connotations – rather than look for an alternate reality. In fact, one gets the idea that there is but one reality for them: the narrators do talk about being free of the constraints put on them, but the tone itself is one of almost disbelief. The fate of each woman seems to be inevitable, simply by virtue of her being a woman. In one of the poems, ‘Choice’, the narrator is a woman who has obviously chosen to tread a path ostensibly different to the one her mother walked on, and yet she finds that the result is invariably the same. She is still left feeling alone and vulnerable, no different and no better than her mother:

I call this freedom now,
watch the word cavort luxuriously, strut
my in independence across whole continents
of sheets. But turning from the grasp
of arms, the rasp of breath,
to look through darkened windows at the night,
Mother, I find you staring back at me.
When did my body agree
to wear your face?¹¹

Dharker’s women are fated to share the same destiny, the same collective kismet. Whether the setting is the sub-continent – India or Pakistan - or the United Kingdom, the women invariably have to

bow to the diktat that seeks to control their lives. Dharker, in one of her interviews says, "... it (the purdah) is one of the instruments used to bring women to heel in the name of religion"¹². As she says in a poem:

But woman. Woman,

you have learnt

that when God comes

you hide your head.¹³

The logic of men can be argued against, sometimes even won over, but the command of god – even the perceived command of god - is to be followed without dissent. This is the trump card that is used time and again for keeping dissenting individuals in check.

Looking at the three texts discussed here, we see the different reactions of the women protagonists, or rather the different treatment of the issue of the Purdah by the three women writers. In Mehta's *Inside the Haveli*, purdah is seen as part of a woman's life and not something to be questioned. The narrative is concerned with Geeta's acceptance of the realities of her life, not the questioning of the 'realities' themselves. Chughtai's heroines react in varied ways to their lot in life, but the writer's stance is clearly one of questioning, indeed defying the norms. When Chughtai's protagonists either give in, or are forced to, she is not advocating this course of action, rather she is holding a mirror to society. Dharker's narrators are mostly women who are willing prisoners,

whose veils exist both in the mind and in reality. While Mehta has an ambiguous attitude about purdah, and sees the Indian woman as attaining selfhood in spite of, or through it, Chughtai and Dharker never advocate it.

Jasbir Jain, in her essay "Gender and Narrative Strategy" writes that "Women writers while evolving narrative strategies are faced with a double problem: how to step out of the framework defined by men and by patriarchal values; and how to identify and create a tradition of their own."¹⁴ The problem is but natural, on one hand it is difficult to disassociate oneself from the fabric one has been born into and lived in, on the other is the need to define one's sense of identity. The issue of identity, discussed in detail in the next chapter, is briefly touched upon to understand the differences in narrative strategy.

We see Mehta, Chughtai and Dharker, all three of them, trying to traverse their way through the task of trying to provide not just their protagonists with an identity but also to give their writing a distinct feel that makes it different from a text written by a male. Whereas Mehta has her protagonist Geeta decide that she can find her identity within the existing social fabric, those of Chughtai's protagonists who conform are condemned to live without any identity of their own. The fact that she actually shows them living in purdah doesn't mean that she, like Mehta, is condoning it. The poems of Dharker show women articulating a desire to be free, but it is an articulation limited to themselves. There is a clear sense of accepting the inevitable in them, even if one is not happy about it.

Dharker uses a monologue to good effect to show the woman's inability to have anyone else, even another woman, understand her predicament.

As Naresh K Jain points out in his essay "Tradition, Modernity and Change", a great many women characters "while questioning traditional values are in favour of adapting themselves to their situations *within* the framework of the family"¹⁵. *Inside The Haveli* is a perfect example of this: Geeta, an educated and city-bred woman, makes a space for herself within a traditional home after marriage. Her actions are meant to be analogous to the traditional standards set by Sita, Savitri and Draupadi. Just as they followed their husbands wherever they went without complaint, so does Geeta support her husband Ajay's decision to stay on in Udaipur and not move to Delhi. She chooses to remain a willing prisoner within the haveli, convinced that this is what she really wants. Mehta's concession to her modern thinking is that, over the course of the years, Geeta starts teaching the maids and their children. Thus the protagonist is shown to have found the correct use for her modern education even while living within the framework of tradition.

Sukriti Paul Kumar, in the introduction to *Ismat: Her Life, Her Times*, writes that "Ismat wore no purdah. And her pen worked as an instrument to shear the purdah behind which the whole world of middle class Muslim women vibrated..."¹⁶ Ismat Chughtai's main contribution to literature, and not just Urdu literature, was the documentation of life behind the purdah as she saw it. She manages

to convey her disapproval of the rules and regulations imposed on women even while depicting their existence in real life. Her stories are not utopian scenarios of the world as she would like it to be but rather a true to life picture of the hidden world of women. Only very few of her heroines, like Samina in "Sacred Duty" actually defy the rules set for them and choose to journey alone. Most of her women protagonists are too tightly bound in tradition to even try and take command of their own lives. Although Chugtai constantly expresses her lack of conviction at submitting to a predestined fate, she recognises the enormity of the task facing all women who seek to step out of the parameters of patriarchy.

Imtiaz Dharker's poems similarly lament the inevitability of a woman giving in to the mores of patriarchy. Her protagonists are none of them really convinced of the parameters imposed on them, yet none of them rebels openly. Their defiance is limited to clandestine liaisons, which more often than not result in a feeling of guilt rather than freedom. Dharker also shows how religion is used – has been used – to perpetuate patriarchal norms and leave women with no excuse to defy what are essentially the rules of men.

Women writers, as has been noticed over the years, are mostly concerned with the conflict between tradition and modernity. K Meera Bai in her essay "Tradition and Modernity: The Potrayal of Women by Women Writers" classifies women into conformists and non-conformists. Conformity, according to her does not mean a "dumb acceptance" of all that is thrust upon them. It takes for granted a certain degree of willingness and whole-hearted

acceptance. Conformists hold on to the set traditions; sometimes even at the cost of individual happiness”¹⁷. Geeta in *Inside the Haveli* seems to fit these criteria perfectly. Not only does she willingly accept to live her life by the traditional norms of the family she marries into, she will clearly pass on the same values to her own daughter. A similar perpetuation of traditional values is seen in Chughtai’s stories and Dharker’s poems. The difference is that neither of these authors is convinced of the values their protagonists adhere to.

In an untitled ghazal, Ishrat Aafreen, a contemporary Pakistani writer, asks

Why do girls follow the destinies of their
mothers?

Why are their bodies deserts, their eyes ocean
deep?

Why do women keep their jewels locked in
trunks

To whom will they bequeath their legacy of
grief?¹⁸

One does indeed wonder why it is that women themselves perpetuate the social laws that are so obviously created to keep them in their place. Is it because they have learnt not to transgress the boundaries set for them? Or is it simply that the image of a woman not questioning the rules has been so deeply – and almost

unconsciously - ingrained in them that any other possibility does not even occur to them.

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- ¹² Andrews, Rita. An Interview with Imtiaz Dharker. (www.durhamcityarts.co.uk)

¹³ Dharker, Imtiaz. *Purdah*. (Delhi: OUP, 1988) p. 8

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¹⁵ Jain, Naresh K. *Women in Indo-Anglican Fiction*. (Delhi: Manohar Publishers, 1998)

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¹⁷ Bai, Meera K. 'Tradition and Modernity: The Portrayal of Women by Women Writers'. Ed. Dhawan, R. K. *Indian Women Novelists*. Vol. I (New Delhi: Prestige, 1991), p. 35

¹⁸ Afreen Ishrat. 'Ghazal'. *Beyond Belief. Contemporary Feminist Urdu Poetry*. Trans. Ahmad, Rukhsana. (Lahore: ASR Publications, 1990), p. 15

Chapter 2

Identity Within the Veil



✓ If one were to look up the word 'woman' in the first edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, one would find a six-word description: 'The female of Man: See Homo'. While we have come a long way since the time the first edition of the encyclopaedia was published in 1771, women are still looking for the best way to define themselves. This chapter will study, for one, the strategy adopted by the three authors to define the identity of their women protagonists and two, the success with which the woman protagonist navigates her identity in the space allocated to her. ✓

The question of the relationship between gender and narrative strategy raises several questions; one among them is the need to justify these terms. At one time, the dominant refrain was that great art is neutral and transcends, among other things, the specifics of sex and race. Great art, it was assumed, could transcend localities and a woman had to attempt to be a 'not-woman'. However, as increasingly became evident, the specifics of time, place, sex and race are actually meaningful – perhaps even determining – aspects of creative activity. The shift in critical theory from new criticism to hermeneutics carries within it the implicit admission that the location of the 'self' is significant.

The three authors – Rama Mehta, Ismat Chughtai and Imtiaz Dharker – all deal with the issue of a woman's identity. All three writers make an attempt to give their writing a distinct feel that sets it apart from a text written by a male. Speaking

generally, the problem faced by women writers has two facets to it: one, to discard the framework defined through the ages by men and by patriarchal values; and two, to determine a tradition of their own.

The first text studied here, Rama Mehta's novel *Inside the Haveli*, chooses a middle path between discarding the traditional framework and defining one of its own. As discussed in the first chapter, the protagonist Geeta, who moves from a modern city-bred life to an existence in purdah, lodges a token initial protest and then settles down into the prescribed way of life and living. Mehta, however, does not see this as a defeat of feminist values but rather as a different kind of feminism. The fact that Geeta decides to find an identity within the existing social fabric is seen as an acceptance of reality and a harbinger of hope for Indian women caught in similar situations. Very clearly then, Mehta rejects the 'western' notion of the woman breaking away from the system to find an identity of her own.

In Chughtai's writing, on the other hand, we see a conscious attempt to delineate the modern from the traditional world and the conflict between the two. It is clear where the problem lies: The woman obviously finds it difficult to disassociate herself from the tradition she has been born into and lived in; and at the same time feels an urge to locate an identity of her own. It is clear which course of action Chughtai herself preferred: Those of her protagonists who conform are condemned to living

without any identity of their own. Despite this, however, most of her protagonists *do* choose to conform. The grain of the text goes against the conventional ending that encloses the protagonists in the claustrophobic domestic space.

In her essay ‘Toward a Feminist Theory of Reading’, Patricia P Schweickart points out that both reading and writing are correlative processes and feminist criticism should address itself, among others, to the following question: ‘What does it mean for a woman to read or write without condemning herself to the position of the other?’¹ This is a pertinent question as far as the literary works of all ‘minority’ – or at least largely ignored – groups go. Dharker, in her collection of poems, uses the concept of the woman being the other to fine effect. The poems, mostly written in a monologue, show the narrator clearly visualising herself as an outsider in the larger world of men. As Dharker says in the poem ‘*Purdah I*’:

“She stands outside herself,
 Sometimes in all four corners of the room,
 Wherever she goes, she is always
 Inching past herself,
 As if she were a clod of earth”²

The fact that women regard their own selves as the other, in fact, brings to the fore one of the most interesting aspects of purdah. As mentioned earlier, women (including women writers) all across the world, have been attempting to find their own tradition to replace the old patriarchal one. In other words, the endeavour has been to define a space they can call their own. The practice of purdah, paradoxically, is seen by quite a few women to provide women with exactly this. Also, being the territory reserved for women, it is regarded as the space where they 'bond' with one another and obtain the succour that is not forthcoming from men. The task at hand of course is to examine if this is indeed so in the texts being studied.

In *Inside the Haveli*, Geeta is almost in awe of the women of all the havelis who take great pride in upholding all the traditions handed down. She feels like an outsider in the face of their shared past, and over the years tries her best to emulate them and not stand out. They possess, according to Geeta,

... a confidence born out of hundreds of years of unbroken tradition. They never faltered or hesitated. If ever in doubt, they consulted the family astrologer. Life, with all its suffering, was never unbearable. They shared each other's joys and wept together in sorrow. They were strong and even ruthless when it came to upholding family customs and ties. Tradition

was like a fortress, giving them security and a sense of superiority.³

Geeta's desire to be one of these women is palpable in this passage. The world of men being completely segregated from her world, Geeta has to choose to either conform and blend in, or assert her individuality and stand out. One could argue that this is no choice at all, but Rama Mehta, as she elaborates in 'Purdah to Modernity'⁴, has a different idea of the possibilities of feminism in Rajasthan. The article does not entirely condemn the purdah or entirely condone modernity. Mehta clearly believes in the sort of 'feminism' where women stand by each other, but only so far as the interest of their men folk is not in question.

Mehta and her protagonist share an admiration for the 'strong' women who are the upholders of tradition. Neither of them sees any reason to question the negation of the woman's identity, even when it is very apparent. Geeta's first child, a girl, is named Vijay, a name usually used for a male, probably to mask the disappointment everyone feels at a not having a son and heir born to her. The blessing Geeta gets to hear most often is "May you always wear red". This translates to the simple fact that her existence is meaningful only in conjunction to her husband. Geeta's mother-in-law too is hardly ever referred by her name in the book; she is always called "Bhagwat Singhji's wife". At the end of the novel, when Bhagwat Singh dies, his wife who is portrayed elsewhere as a

“tower of strength” is shown to suddenly appear “frail and delicate”. Dressed in black and devoid of all her gold ornaments, she symbolically hands over the keys of the haveli to Geeta. The story – and Geeta’s quest for an individual existence - has now come full circle: it is her turn to uphold the traditions of the haveli.

In Ismat Chughtai’s collection of short stories too, the woman is shown to be the keeper of customs and conventions, even when they go against her own interests. In ‘Lingering Fragrance’,⁵ for instance, all but one of the main characters are women. All of them, whether begum of the mahal or the maid, accept the tradition of ‘gifting’ a virgin maid to initiate each adolescent boy in the family into manhood. The begums accept the fact that their respective husbands will have any number of concubines, and consider themselves lucky if the ‘other’ woman also turns out to be a good and faithful maid. The maids, on their part, know they hold, at best, a distant second place in their ‘husbands’ life, and that until they either become pregnant or are displaced by a younger maid. There is, in fact, a great camaraderie between the eldest begum and the erstwhile mistress of her husband. They scheme and plot together, never once questioning their own fate or the unfairness of inflicting a similar one on younger women. The only woman saved the usual fate, almost against her wish, is the maid Haleema. And it takes a man to save her. The tradition, thus, is seen to be broken, but by a man.

In another story – ‘The Rock’⁶ – both the conventional first wife as well as the ‘modern’ second wife of the narrator’s brother do not utter a murmur of protest against his philandering ways. Also, both of them are shown to have an identity of their own *until* they get married. Post marriage, it is not just their names that change from ‘Shenaz’ and ‘Shabnam’ to ‘Bhabhi’ for both, their very physical appearance and demeanour undergoes a metamorphosis: from attractive, confident young girls they turn into fat, unsightly women, while the man keeps looking young and fit. It is almost as if the man’s idea of how a wife should be is somehow embodied to perfection by both women.

✓ Jasbir Jain, in her essay ‘Gender and Narrative Strategy’, says, “Women have not learned to see themselves for the mirrors they look into do not reflect them. They reflect the male idea of a woman whether single or married.”⁷ One can read all three texts in the light of this statement and gauge the truth of it. A woman, at any given moment, is supposed to live up to a certain image of her, and she usually does. Dharker’s poem, aptly titled ‘Image’, depicts the situation:

“You hold so many possibilities,

just inside the skin.

You could be any number of things:

manipulator, mechanical pawn,

victim.”⁸

It is interesting to note the juxtaposition of the 'possibilities' and what a woman actually 'could be'. The first two lines seem to offer the woman hope, the third seems to offer endorsement – until Dharker goes on to elaborate just what a woman can be: a manipulator, a pawn or a victim. All three are roles that require the active involvement of another being, in this case clearly a man. We can, actually see the three as a stages of a woman's 'growth' in reverse: she is, right from her birth, a hapless victim, then a pawn in the hands of various men in control of her destiny, and finally, a perpetrator of the injustice on other women.

Sylvia Plath, in a poem titled 'Purdah', also reinforces the notion of a woman having an identity of her own as impossible:

“Little nets,

My visibilities hide.

I gleam like a mirror.

At this facet the bridegroom arrives

Lord of the mirrors!

It is himself he guides.

I am his.

Even in his

Absence. I

Resolve in my

Sheath of impossibles.”⁹

Plath, noticeably, like Dharker elsewhere, also talks of mirrors. Going back to Jasbir Jain’s analogy, one can contend that the mirrors reflect the men in women’s lives – the fathers and brothers and husbands and sons who are out there in the open, while the women themselves are confined to the realms behind the veil. As Simone de Beauvoir put it, “Humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him: she is not regarded as an autonomous being.”¹⁰ That is the real reason why she is put in purdah, why only her men can ‘see her’ and why she can see only what the men want her to. There are several women who try to live life vicariously through one of their men, but this surrogate link is ultimately found to be unsatisfying. Despite this, most women prefer to go by the rules, prefer to be miserable in company rather than risk being alone.

So, does the purdah give women some sort of a collective identity? We have already seen that woman as an individual entity is virtually non-existent, but does living in a world separate from the world of men provide women with a collective identity? Is there a sort of a sisterhood that springs up between the women living away from the rest of the world? One would expect so, but surprisingly in all the texts explored

here, there is no mention of any two women being friends. There is shown to exist between the women rivalry, or tolerance, or a mistress-servant relationship, or a feeling of awe for an older woman, even a sexual, lesbian relation ...but never companionship. Even sisters vie with each other for favours received. The one reason I can see is that if one is brought up, right from birth, to believe in a rigid hierarchy, it is but natural to measure everything in terms of how much power it imparts. The women are constantly on guard against each other and revel in finding out each other's weak points. In both Mehta's and Chughtai's texts, the maids are shown to be constantly bickering amongst themselves and jealous of any favours bestowed upon any one of them. The 'competition' between the ladies of the manor is more subtle, but definitely present. One of Chughtai's protagonists goes as far as flaunting her child, born out of wedlock, in front of her lover's wife, causing her to commit suicide.

There is yet another facet of the purdah: that of it providing a private space to women. An interesting article by Sehmina Chopra,¹¹ found on the Internet, defends the practice of purdah. According to the writer, the veil can be a liberating experience. The 'true' reason for the purdah, she asserts, is a source of identity and faith. What makes the article and the ideas expressed in it even more interesting is the fact that the writer is a Muslim woman married to a Hindu. Is she, one wonders, trying to establish her own identity which has been

questioned? Isn't this assertion somewhat similar to Muslims all over the western world growing beards in defiance of the backlash against the community after the WTC attack? Or a lot of Sikhs in India, who otherwise had given up the practise of wearing turbans, taking it up again after scores of them were killed in retaliation of Indira Gandhi's murder?

Is the purdah then just such an assertion of identity? There is no hard and fast answer. Or rather, while it is true that some women may practice purdah (or may be induced to practice purdah) to establish an identity, this is a trend that conceals a religious chauvinism ultimately harmful to women.

It is yet again the woman who is handed the task of being the keeper of tradition, as well as morality. Women are supposed to hide their bodies and their faces since the sight of them might induce men to immoral thoughts and deeds. Feminists all over the world might questioned the unfairness of seeing the woman only as a body, but it has made little difference in day to day lives of women. An article in a national weekly magazine¹², some years ago, focused on the 'non-religious' reasons women were taking to purdah. One of the main reasons was to avoid the pestering of men in public places. In a society where most acts of transgression by men are found excusable, one really cannot blame the women for trying to protect themselves.

Reasons such as these make a substantial number of women see the purdah as a kind of protection against the outside world. Dharker, in one of her most read poems, declares:

“Purdah is a kind of safety.

The body finds a place to hide.”¹³

The purdah, on one hand, symbolises the boundary, the wall encircling women, a line they cannot cross. Paradoxically, however, a number of women themselves see it also as a space within which they are ‘free’ to lead their own life, free from the ever watchful eyes of men. Like Dharker’s protagonist who finds safety in purdah, Geeta in *Inside the Haveli* becomes accustomed to the segregated life that women lead and begins to enjoy the ‘freedom’ that the veil provides. The purdah here can alternatively be seen as a subterfuge the women employ, the necessary cunning of women who are denied control over their own destiny:

“She came to love the veil that hid her face, this allowed her to think while the others talked. To her delight she had discovered that through her thin muslin sari, she could see everyone and yet not be seen by them.”¹⁴

The zenana, the world of the women, in Chughtai’s writing – whether the women are in purdah or not – is almost always seen as a separate world. The fact of a segregated life is drilled

into the girl right since childhood. Even in the modern households that she depicts, the women do retreat to their inner world to counsel with each other and themselves. The men folk are not seen to bother with the problems of the women, leaving them to sort it out themselves. This is not, as it might ostensibly seem, an act of expressing faith in women on their part. It is just that 'women's problems' are too trivial and unimportant for the men to waste their valuable time on. The women, not so deep down, know the truth, but they almost will themselves to believe that this is the 'correct' way.

One would think that it would be easy to dismiss the presence of men in a text written specifically about women; about the segregated, separate world of women. The zenana is a closed world, as well as a clearly defined one, and it should have been quite easy to exclude men and place them on the periphery of this world. Theoretically this might sound plausible, but it is not so in practical terms. In fact the very identity of the woman is most often defined by the man currently 'in charge' of her. Also, the basic fact remains that purdah is the creation of men. The bounds of a woman's world are defined, imposed and controlled by men. According to Jasbir Jain, "Purdah defines male attitudes and psychology as much as it defines female attitudes and psychology. Purdah imposes on women the psychology of prisoners, of victims and the subordinate, while it turns the men into gaolers and abettors in the process of subordination".¹⁵ Women, on their part, have over the ages, convinced themselves that the segregation is something they had a say in and now, given a choice, would not alter. Even if they don't believe that the limits were set for their own good, it is easier by far to stay within them. even to convince themselves that it gives them their private space.

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¹⁴ Mehta, Rama. *Inside the Haveli*. (New Delhi: Arnold-Heineman, 1997). p.19

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Chapter 3

Crossing the Threshold



Purdah is not merely a form of dress or custom, rather, it is indicative of a whole social system. It reinforces the idea of female subordination inbuilt in patriarchal societies. It also defines the structures of power and politics within a family and constitutes the basis of gender ideology.

Purdah is based on the principle of inequality (not difference, as many religious scholars would have us believe), and establishes itself on the dual strategy of control and exclusion. It defines space, action and relationships. Several varied systems of thought converge into this practice. The world is seen to be divided into the outer and the inner worlds, the domain of the man and the woman, respectively. As Partha Chatterjee writes in *The Nation and its Fragments, Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*, "The world is a treacherous terrain of the pursuit of material interests, where practical conditions reign supreme. It is also typically the domain of the male. The home in its essence must remain unaffected by the profane activities of the material world – and woman is its representation."¹

Malashri Lal, in *Law of the Threshold*,² divides space into three parts: the home, the threshold and the world outside. According to the Law, space is seen as originating from the physical arrangements of domestic order but extending to the metaphorical notions that create totems and taboos of human conduct. The home, with its traditional associations as a place of nurture, family values and ethics, is understood to be the

woman's place. The world beyond the home is the world of man, the world separated from the woman's world by the purdah.

Men have, traditionally, passed over the threshold unchallenged and partaken of both worlds, within the home and outside it. Women, on the other hand, have been expected to inhabit only the one world contained by the boundaries that demarcate the home. For a woman, a step over the boundary is an act of transgression. A woman who steps out of the set parameters defies the norms and is henceforth barred from re-entering the 'sacred' domestic space. Unlike the man, she has to choose between the two worlds, and in case she chooses to step out, the choice is an irreversible one. The Law, then, we can say, allows multiple existences for men but a single one for women.

Given the repercussions, it is not surprising that most women choose to live within the space allocated to them. Though the various women in the three texts studied here are no different, there are, however, instances of some women having stepped out of the designated space.

Inside the Haveli draws a class parallel between the young educated daughter-in-law Geeta and the fifteen-year-old servant girl Lakshmi. They are both newly married, their daughters are born on the same day, almost the same time, and to begin with, they both harbour rebellious sentiments

against the tradition of the haveli. Geeta, with the progression of time, learns to be part of the tradition, while Lakshmi seeks to escape from it.

At the end of Section I of the novel, Lakshmi chooses to flee the restraints of the haveli. A child-mother of fifteen, Lakshmi had, through fright, not guile, kept silent about the solicitations of the driver Heeralal. Gossip exaggerates the contact beyond truth, and the bewildered Lakshmi is accused by her husband and the other servants of adultery. Angry and distraught at such unjust abuse, she leaves her baby, Sita, in the custody of the haveli and steals away to the city. Alone and with no choice but to be self-reliant, she tries to make another life for herself. Lakshmi is said to work as a servant in the house of a tailor, but there is an implicit mention of her not doing 'respectable' work. Sudhir Kakar in "Feminine Identity in India" discusses the demarcation in Hindu scriptures and conduct books between women as wives and women as prostitutes. Women are respected provided they conform to the patterns defined by men. It is not wifedom alone that confers a social status on women, what is also required is a faithful adherence to the code of behaviour. "To be a good wife is to be a good woman³", Kakar writes. Since Lakshmi proves to be an 'untrue' wife, it follows that she is not a good woman.

Symbolically, when Pari and the cook, Khyali, go to see Lakshmi to try and convince her to return, Lakshmi is shown to have shed the *ghungat*.

“She stood before them, her hands on her hips,
and her face uncovered.”⁴

She refuses to go back to the haveli, not moved even by entreaties about her new-born child starving to death. Lakshmi thus refutes the both roles, of the wife and mother, conferred on her. And thus loses her claim to being a ‘respectable’ woman.

It is not guilt that drives Lakshmi from the haveli, but terror of the old ways. It does not matter that she is innocent, she knows well that she will have to humble herself and bear the wrath of her husband. It is interesting to note that in all of this, Heeralal carries on unpunished after a token threat by the master of the house. Lakshmi, being a woman, will never be ‘pure’ again. Her own brother refuses her shelter, so she goes to the paanwala Hari, and then the tailor. Completely marginalised, she is not recognised by her daughter Sita when she tries to meet her in school. Lakshmi has to cover her face when she goes to meet her daughter, which can be seen as her trying to return to the safety behind the purdah. This is however not allowed: once the woman has stepped out, she cannot return. Even the other maids in the haveli are aware that Lakshmi’s return would be dangerous, as it would lead to social chaos. In this case, it is also likely to break Sita’s engagement. Confined to their role-playing, they shed tears for her death in life.

The woman, we can see, never gets away with her transgress, even that just attributed to her. Imtiaz Dharker, in her poem 'Pariah', writes of a woman who has, in the eyes of the world, transgressed the norms:

 Their looks are whiplashes,
 Perhaps I have transgressed.
 But what do they know
 of sin and judgement, and
 true righteousness? ⁵

Basically, the women who cross the boundaries of the space allotted to them lose the protection it offers. They are left on their own, isolated and punished once they transgress limits set for them. The *lakshman rekha* thus becomes almost an archetype for this: the moment she puts a foot over it – in essence disobeys a direct command of a man – the woman is on her own.

Dharker, in 'Purdah I', describes the woman's actions as being the object of scrutiny of other people, who observe her, waiting for a sign of rebellion. All this while, her seclusion grows, cutting her further and further from the outside world:

 While doors keep opening
 inward and again

inward.⁶

The young woman is placed in a closed environment, and the seclusion is not just of the body but of the intellect and personality as well, which are denied the opportunity to develop. The poem carries in it what A K Tiwari calls a “discreet rebellion against the practise by describing the damaging effect it has on the psyche of a young woman”⁷.

In the poem ‘Purdah II’, Dharker mentions a few women who rebel against the norms of their Muslim community in Britain, and how futile their rebellion turns out to be. Saleema falls in love with an Englishman, but since her faith prohibits marriage with a non-Muslim, she marries within her own community, and has ‘annual babies’. Saleema does give rebellion a shot, she gets a divorce, marries again and becomes a typical subservient wife.

The fate of a Muslim girl actually getting married to a non-Muslim is shown to be an unhappy one. Naseem, who marries an Englishman, is given up for dead by her family. Dharker, with characteristic irony, says:

The table is laden at Mohurram

and you are remembered

among the dead. No going back.

The prayer’s said.⁸

As postulated at the beginning of the chapter, the law that governs the lives of women does not allow transgressors enter back into the fold. The irony is that the woman who steps out of the bonds in search of freedom and fulfilment, often finds new bonds placed on her. In the poem quoted above, for instance, Naseem suffers family displeasure only to find herself completely at the mercy of the Englishman who promised her freedom. She has thus, substituted the patriarchal norms of her family for the norms of the another man, and spends her time constantly on her knees, "trying to smile and be accepted".

In Chughtai's stories, we come across women who mostly accept life in purdah and conform, usually quite unwillingly, to the norm. The women are shown mostly to be unsure of the unknown world that lies outside, and afraid of the repercussions they might face if they deviate. The women who do rebel, however, are not always shown to lead a life of misery though, which sets her apart from the other two writers. Most notable amongst Chughtai's rebels is Samina, the heroine of "Sacred Duty", who marries a man of her choice, and one who happens to be a non-Muslim.

Samina, however, also has to leave home because of her decision, and where she goes with her husband is not known to anybody. It is left to the reader to guess whether her fate will be similar to Dharker's Naseema who is "remembered among the dead" by her family: It is clear that Samina will not be able to go back to her earlier status as beloved daughter of the

house. Chughtai does leave the story open-ended, but the fact that Samina has to disappear into the unknown is a hint as to the fate of rebels. Again, her happiness hinges on Tashar, the man she has married: if he turns his back on her, she will lose both worlds.

In another story, 'A Pair of hands', Chughtai presents another protagonist who can be seen as a rebel. Gori, the young sweepress, has an illicit relationship with her husband's cousin. Everyone, including her husband and mother-in-law, know that the child she bears is not her husband's, and they could interpret this as a 'real' transgress. However, both of them not just accept the child but actually welcome his birth. (It should be noted that it is a male child) This can be contrasted with Lakshmi's situation in *Inside the Haveli*, where she is *thought* to have violated the sanctity of marriage and ostracised. The difference in the treatment of the two women could be attributed to a simple reason: economics. Though the protagonists in both cases belong to the working class, Gangaram leads a relatively comfortable life in the haveli while Ram Autar has actually bought his bride for a given sum of money and now wants to be repaid. The norms, we thus see, can be altered if it so suits the man.

All the women might not be literally bought for money, but they are all of them in some way 'indebted' to their men for their very existence and spend their lives trying to pay off the debt. Dharker, in "Purdah II", expresses the sentiment:

They have all been sold and bought,
the girls I knew,
unwilling virgins who had been taught...

Susan Bordo, while commenting on the concept of femininity, points out that it is the female body “whose forces and energies are habituated to external regulation, subjection, transformation, improvement. Through the exacting and normalizing disciplines of diet, make-up and dress – central organizing principles of time and space in the days of many women – (we) are rendered less socially oriented and more centripetally focused on self-modification.”⁹ The female body is thus seen to be a possession, valuable only as far as she lets herself be treated like that. Any time she is perceived to have a consciousness of her own, or even an inclination to make a decision, the woman is perceived as a threat to the patriarchal system.

Economic factors could also be the reason for the noticeable difference in the degree of purdah observed by the women of various social classes. The upper class women in both Mehta’s and Chughtai’s texts are women who ‘need to be protected from the evil eye’. The working class women, however, cannot afford these notions, and since it isn’t practically possible to both hide your face and work, the strictures for them are relaxed. This does not mean that the lower class women are placed on par with their men, but the processes at work here are different.

And again, the women of both classes are themselves aware of it and adhere to the roles assigned to them. The purdah, thus, is as much a class construct as a religious phenomenon.

Chughtai's story 'Lingering Fragrance' can also be seen as an example of this. The women of the servant class are 'gifted' to each the rich young man of the haveli who's coming of age. Apart from Chhamman Mian, no one else, including the maids, see anything wrong with this practice. Eyebrows are raised, however, when news of the Chhamman's young, educated fiancé playing tennis with a male friend reaches the haveli. The difference between the rules for the two classes is clear: while the 'bride' is meant to be pure and chaste, the role of the mistress is to provide pleasure. Of course the two are bonded in the fact that while the man can 'own' several women, the same is not true of the woman. Whether wife or mistress, she is supposed to be faithful to one man, her master. Either relationship, that of the wife and the mistress, is defined by the relationship to the man, again enhancing his centrality. This also defines the space which is available to women and the rewards and punishments associated with obedience and defiance. Purdah, often mentioned synonymously with modesty ('*laaj*', '*sharam*'), is symbolic of conformity, while the concept of independence, freedom and self are all relegated to a world outside it.

Basically then, the woman's real transgress is going against the wishes of the man. The particulars of the norms set for

each woman might differ from each other, but in essence there is one norm that does not change: that of being subservient to every command, real or perceived, of the man.

In Mehta's *Inside the Haveli*, there are only two facets to a woman: She is either shown as adapting herself to what life brings her, or someone who is suffering because she stepped out of the 'protected' sanctuary of home. Chughtai shows us women who have discarded the purdah, but not the purdah mentality. These women are shown to have stepped out of purdah at the behest of their men but the 'stepping out' is only a removal of the veil that covers their faces, not freedom in the real sense. One is reminded of Laila's description of such women in Attia Hossain's *Sunlight on A Broken Column*:

The minds of some of these women remained smothered in the burqas they had outwardly discarded and men who met women socially ... mentally relegated them to harems and zenanas.¹⁰

Although Chughtai does not express this sentiment aloud, the thought is implicit in her presentation. Whether it is 'Kallu', 'The Rock', 'Poison' or 'By the Grace of God', the women are shown to be bound by mental purdahs, even when they have removed the physical one. In 'Kallu', for instance, the girls stay inside the women's quarters unless there is an eligible bachelor to be met at a party and their father thinks they should attend.

There is again, an underlying economic cause to this, as explained by the narrator of the story:

These were bad times; nice young men were nearly impossible to find, and those who were around demanded that a car and fare to England be included in the dowry. Such demands could be taken into consideration if there was only one girl in the family to be wed. But here there were many. Also, the loss of land had resulted in a lowering of status and income ... If a rare party did come around, Chacha Mian saw to it that the girls attended.¹¹

In essence, whether they stay behind the veil carry it with themselves in their mind, the actions of women are governed by the commands of men. In the words of Dharker:

There you are, I can see you all now

in the tenements up north.

In or out of purdah. Tied, or bound.

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Chapter 4

The Language of Silence

“If I were a man who cared to know the world I lived in, I almost think it would make me a shade uneasy – the weight of that long silence of one half of the world.” This statement by Elizabeth Robins forms the epigraph of Shashi Deshpande’s novel *That Long Silence*¹. The implication intended can be read as the motto of Indian women authors in general: the resolve to break the silence that has kept women, as it were, in a state of hibernation.

Manjit Inder Singh, in his essay “Imagination and the ‘Other’”, expresses the opinion that, “Indian women writers write, not essentially to creatively or politically ‘subvert’ the patriarchal literary form, or to invert the structures of domination to substitute a female tradition or traditions in place of a male dominated canon as elsewhere in the world where feminist politics have had their sway. On the other hand, it is the intensity of experience or anguish of being a *woman* that has brought to the fore a vital imagination charged with a genuine urge for expression ...²”. The ‘urge for expression’ probably stems from the fact that for centuries Indian women were not able to openly articulate their predicament.

The consciousness about a woman’s inability to talk aloud is thus inbuilt in the Indian woman writer’s psyche. In trying to write about it, women writers are not just bringing this facet to light, but actually countering it.

In studying the Indian woman's predicament, one is reminded of the age-old injunction: "Good Girls Should Be Seen, Not Heard". In an ironical, but sadly unforeseen, twist, the purdah, which was meant to hide the body of the woman, has actually heightened its visibility. While women were, through the enforcement of purdah and the stress on conventionality of dress and segregation meant to acquire asexual virtues, the fallout of the purdah mentality has been quite the opposite. Purdah, in essence, stresses the existence of the woman as a female body, thereby defeating its own purpose. This has, as Margaret Cousins says in *Indian Womanhood Today*, proved detrimental to the development of both men and women. It is in essence a denial of adulthood to humans and shows, in the words of Cousins, "an appalling lack of faith in the higher and purer nature of men and women. The men seem to think that the sight and companionship of women would tempt them beyond control ..."³

The body of the woman, therefore, instead of becoming invisible, is brought into focus more prominently. The voice of the woman, in contrast, is what fades into oblivion.

The fact of this is amply demonstrated by the protagonists in the writings of the three writers studied here: None of the protagonists in the three texts talks to another person about herself or her life. These lines from Dharker's poem "A Woman's Place", perhaps best typify this:

Mouths must be watched, especially
if you're a woman. A smile
should be stifled with the sari-end.
No one must see your serenity cracked,
even with delight.
If occasionally you need to scream, do it
alone but in front of a mirror
where you can see the strange shape the mouth
takes
before you wipe it off.⁴

Dharker's poems are all written from the perspective of a woman narrator, a narrator who is very obviously alienated from the world and unable to hold a dialogue with it. Dharker uses a monologue to good effect to show the woman's inability to have anyone else, even another woman, understand her predicament. The predicament here is not just of the handful of Dharker's narrators, but of women in general.

Geeta, in *Inside the Haveli*, journeys from being an outsider to the traditions of the haveli to the upholder of them. It is obvious that she faces many dilemmas along the way, as well as moments of happiness and despair. She does not, however, articulate her emotions - her problems, her sorrows, her joys -

aloud to anyone. The reader is constantly made aware of Geeta's feelings, but mostly through the omnipresent author, not through Geeta's dialogue with anyone.

Even though Geeta changes completely from the 'lively and spontaneous' girl she was at nineteen when she came to the haveli, she is constantly reminded to control her emotions better. Note this passage:

In the two years Geeta had lost much of her exuberance, but still she was unable to fully control either her words or her feelings. She was still capable of talking frankly with her younger in-laws. Because of this, her mother-in-law kept reminding her of the importance of reticence.⁵

Over the years Geeta becomes more adept not just at handling the physical veil but also at hiding her emotions behind it. In the beginning, she does let her husband know that she is not completely happy leading the cloistered life, but as the novel proceeds, her protests become fewer. Even the few times she 'voices' her opinion, like on the possibility of her young daughter getting married, she very soon silences her inner voice and acquiesces by keeping quiet.

In the introduction to *Women in Indo-Anglican Fiction*, Naresh Jain points out that, "Silence-Speech dichotomy can be useful in locating women on the tradition-modernity axis. How do

women characters respond to male hegemony? Is it silence or is it speech? Not to talk back is part of the culturally inherited value of modesty and is considered essentially feminine.”⁶ Going by these standards, Geeta is a traditional woman and becomes progressively more ‘feminine’ with time.

Exploring the dichotomy further, silence in this sense is a symbol of being oppressed, a characteristic of the subaltern condition. Speech, on the contrary, signifies self-expression and freedom. Since both are curtailed by the purdah, the veil can also be thought to be synonymous with silence.

Ironically, silence does not reign behind veil as far as the woman’s monologue with herself is concerned. It is almost as if the self is split into two, with one going through the motions and the other watching, analysing, but helpless to do anything. In Chughtai’s short story “Choti Apa”, for instance, the narrator comes across her elder sister’s old diary. In the diary are recorded the sister’s escapades, her romantic rendezvous of younger days. The narrator is completely taken by surprise at discovering an unexpected side of her docile, traditional sister, a side nobody ever suspected the existence of.

There are several things to be noted here: the first is of course the fact that the main protagonist, Choti Apa, does not utter a word in the entire narrative. The second is the secret diary, written because the writer wanted to ‘vomit out’ all the things

she was holding back, and did not have anyone else to talk to. Right at the beginning of the she writes:

“Today, why do I long to pour my heart out to someone? ... Today I feel compelled to blurt it all out. Vomit it into my pillow.”⁷

For the young writer, writing the diary is a form of catharsis, and one she indulges in in the absence of any other means of voicing her emotions. Even when she is writing her down her most intimate feelings, one can feel a sense of detachment in the narrative, as if she is at the same time watching herself.

The image of a woman’s complete isolation from the world she lives in is completed towards the end of the story. The protagonist, whom we have seen as a lively young woman in the pages of the diary, is shown to us as sitting “quietly in one corner of the sofa, the end of her sari drawn modestly over her hair.”⁸

Rani Dharker, talking about the centrality of marriage in an Indian woman’s life, expresses the opinion that: “To a girl staining toward marriage, to a woman after she has attained that paradisaical state, marriage works effectively as purdah – as effectively as though she were indeed swathed in folds of heavy black cloth...”⁹ In both the cases discussed above, that of Geeta and ‘Choti Aapa’, the state of matrimony could indeed be seen as imposing the ultimate vow of silence on the women. It is, however, not marriage alone that brings about this state,

though it does enhance it. It is part of a woman's 'education' right from childhood to be told to not express her views.

Simone de Beauvoir's well known statement that one is not born a woman but rather becomes one, is enacted in our society where the woman early on learns that she is '*paraya dhan*' or '*gair ki amamnat*', her parents responsibility till the day she is handed over to her rightful owners. And once married, her conditioning is complete: she loses whatever little individuality she had and lapses into a world of silence.

Marriage, as the woman discovers, brings with it not the anticipated freedom but even less independence than she had in her parents house. Now she has to suffocate herself in order to please her husband and in-laws. She is the 'Other' who has to mould herself to the looker's, the subject's wishes. Notice this passage from *Inside the Haveli*, where Geeta's mother-in-law has come in to give her instructions on how to conduct herself at the celebrations going to be held:

Do not talk too much to your young cousins-in-law, its not becoming. You know, the women are critical because you are still clumsy. I want to show them even an educated girl can be moulded. That I was not wrong in selecting you as the wife of my only son. Besides, I am getting old and soon you will have to take over,' she

said, and carefully fastened the bracelet on
Geeta's wrist.¹⁰

Both the word 'moulded' and the action of fastening the bracelet are significant here. Geeta as the outsider has to be guided to follow the set matrix and also schooled into being the carrier of tradition for the next generation. One is, at this point reminded of Geeta's mother advising her, just before her marriage, to be submissive at all times. The young girl at that time had smiled at her mother, but she can't afford to take the instructions meted out now lightly.

In one of Imtiaz Dharker's poems, the protagonist is described as a wife and a mother, diagnosed with an unnameable malady and perpetually silent:

She stops,

searching for words to say.

In a place loud with voices

this passes for silence.

...

In this place, everything speaks

The difficulty is, having spoken,

to be understood.¹¹

The narrator here is asking for the silence of the woman to be understood, a task she herself recognises as difficult. Shibani Roy¹², in describing the various types of purdah, mentions *awaz ka purdah* as one of them. In one of Chughtai's most touching stories, 'The Wedding Shroud', the old widowed mother and the elder daughter, Kubra, both strictly adhere to this. The mother does not speak to her own brother about the marriage of their respective children to each other, nor does Kubra ever voice an opinion about the matter. The only female voice we hear in the narrative is that of the younger daughter and narrator, Hameeda, but even she desists in telling her mother and sister about Rahat's lecherous advances.

Though the story is poignant, one can perhaps see a feeble ray of hope for Hameeda. Although she complies with the schemes her mother and her (the mother's) adopted sister think of, she at least realises the futility and unfairness of the situation. There is a faint optimism that she might not suffer the same fate as her sister since her thinking 'has been poisoned by (her) new friends'. At the same time, her mother, the archetypal keeper of tradition at all costs, keeps telling her to get rid of these new-fangled notions. Again, women are held equally responsible in perpetuating the purdah.

The girl-child is, right from the start, instructed to be submissive and compliant. It is for her 'own good' that she should learn to curb her wayward thoughts, but the next best thing is to not put them into spoken words. At any given point

of time, the woman is expected to police her speech. In Dharker's words:

Checkpoint:

The place in the throat

where words are halted,

not allowed to pass,

where questions form

and are not asked.¹³

One might, from a study of these - and most other texts written by women about women - get a pessimistic picture of an Indian woman's attainment of self-expression. However, the fact that these texts articulate the predicament of the woman, is itself a step towards the achievement of the goal. According to Malashri Lal, however, there is a limit to how far they go in their articulation.

Lal, while explaining the 'methodology' of the Law of the Threshold, divides space into three components: the interior, the doorway and the outside world. According to Lal, most Indian writers, on the whole, "they invert the Western assumption of home as a private place"¹⁴, but it is only the public aspects of home are described, dwelt upon and become subject to analysis. What are not depicted are intimacies, though their consequences will affect the story.

While this criticism might stand true for Mehta, Chughtai and Dharker definitely do try and probe the private lives of a household along with its public aspect. They might not always be successful, but it's a step nevertheless.

Jasbir Jain calls women's writing 'the literature of silence'¹⁵. There are two reasons for this: One, its meaning often lies enclosed and camouflaged. Two, it seeks to express that which has been submerged and suppressed. We can therefore see writing itself as an act of courage. It is through language that the subversion of patriarchy can be achieved. Feminism, however, runs the risk of finding an 'authentic' language by articulating it on a gender based insulation and hence limiting the scope of a textual response. Thus, to say that a feminine language must have characteristics not shared by males and demonstrated by all female users of the language, is an instance of it. It is more helpful to as an attitude to understand the theory of language in a postcolonial context.

In rejecting the notion of an essentially sexist or male language, the way is open for a coherent theory of appropriation. The basic dilemma of the feminist poetics has always been the assertion on the one hand that the otherness of the woman is the construction of patriarchy, yet the insistence that it is out of this otherness that that a female language must be constructed.

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Conclusion

Feminist theory, as Rajeshwari Sunder Rajan says, is by no means a “single or homogenous body of speculation and argument¹”. The one common strand one can discern in the diversity of feminism, it is the critique of the patriarchal modes of thinking and its political approach to literature and literary criticism.

Though feminism can now be considered a global phenomenon, and feminists of all shades and nationalities, including Indians, share the basic paradigms of feminism, they are at the same time eager to proclaim their difference and to carve a separate identity for themselves. Most postcolonial feminist critics in India adopt a stance that is feminist as well as anti-imperialist. Susie Tharu and K Lalitha², for instance, have made an attempt to create a separate tradition of Indian women’s writing and to rewrite literary history from their position of postcolonial feminists.

The feminist tradition in India is, as yet, at a nascent stage. At Manjit Inder points out, Indian women writers do not yet write essentially “to creatively or politically ‘subvert’ the patriarchal literary form, or to invert the structures of domination to substitute a female tradition or traditions in place of a male dominated canon as elsewhere in the world where the feminist politics have had their sway³”. It is rather the experience of being a woman, and the desire for sharing it, that has inspired most Indian women writers so far.

The three texts studied here also belong to the same tradition. Though separated by time, and to some extent geography, all three address central concerns of being a woman and living in a secluded world of women. Of the three, It is Mehta who takes the prescriptive route in *Inside the Haveli*. She advocates a special breed of 'feminism' for the Indian woman: that of looking for and succeeding in attaining an identity within the bounds of tradition. Neither Ismat Chughtai nor Imtiaz Dharker believe in this possibility, although both of them recognise the almost impossible task facing women in contemplating breaking out of the mould. That is not to say that either of these authors advocates a blind adherence to the so-called 'western' modern way of life. Rather, they argue for a woman to have the liberty to think for herself, and the authority to choose what they perceive as the best course of action.

Most Indian woman writes, actually, describe very well the world inhabited by women, but stop short of advocating a solution. However, it is the awareness of one's colonial state that is important, and it is a beginning towards achieving freedom from the distortions inherent in the female situation. As Chughtai herself is quoted as saying: "Pruning the leaves and branches of trees is sheer folly when it is the roots that require change. Only when the roots change will the leaves and branches change!".

Feminism begins with the self, which may not necessarily be the intellectual self. Most cultures define women's roles

through their bodily behavior, menstruation and puberty, chastity and marriage, procreative ability and power. Most societies also have their own regulations of conduct for women, and for almost all cultures these are meant to 'keep women in their place'. Women's writing is changing the terms of these definitions. With all its variety, timidity and marginality, this is true of Indian writing as well. Self-expression and self-questioning will lead the way to self-assertion and redefinition.

There are a series of works by Indian authors on the fixed, stereotypical role of the woman, but these have remained isolated at the level of an Indian ethos. The overtly subversive positions and the increasing reference to the principle of 'difference' lying at the very heart of the construction of the 'other' in the feminist debate, have not yet been absorbed in the Indian literary and critical arguments. However, Indian women writers are attempting to 'write the body', as exhorted by Helene Cixous:

Woman must write her self, must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away ---

Women must put herself into the text – as into the world and into history – by her own movements.⁵

Viney Kirpal avers that the portrayal of women and their experiences by some Indian women writers has undergone a significant change in the 1980s. Under the influence of the

gender revolution of the 1970s, writing by women about women has become a political act. There is a strong element of protest in their novels now. Like their counterparts in the West, they question the oppressor or the social other. The other or the oppressor in the Indian context is not just the or lover but the entire family, and sometimes the whole society. This new writing by Indian women writers is feminist in character. Kirpal calls it “a frontal attack on patriarchy and its tools – the processes of socialization, traditional myths, social customs, practices – that are responsible for the zero worth of women in our society⁶”. Women are learning to speak their own language, and yet making sure that everyone understands it.

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