

Under the Purdah: Network of Gender, Class, and Religion in Iqbalunnisa Hussain's Purdah and Polygamy: The Life in an Indian Muslim Household (1944)

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Abstract

While the canon of 1940s subcontinental literature is dominated by broad political narratives, Iqbalunnisa Hussain's *Purdah and Polygamy* (1944) turns inward, using the Zenana as a microcosm to expose the pervasive network of patriarchy. This paper argues that Hussain's work is a radical act of resistance precisely through its a-political focus, challenging the patriarchal matrix that male authors often reinforced. By unveiling the "purdah" on the female world, Hussain demonstrates how women exercise agency within severe constraints and ensures that the "doubly colonized" are not forgotten. Hussain's zoomed-in lens on Zenana focuses on the intersection of gender, class, and religion to challenge them. Recuperating her voice is thus fundamental to challenging the political, male-centered narratives of the Partition-era India.

Keywords: Zenana, Patriarchal Matrix, Partition Literature, Female Agency, Purdah & Polygamy

Introduction

The historiography and canonization of literature, especially novels from the subcontinent, focus on writers who stage broader political themes of colonization, home rule, partition, and resistance to foreign control. Coupled with the politics of the time, the well-known authors, mostly male, implicitly and explicitly promote patriarchal themes. For example, Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan* is a canonical representation of the broader political themes; it ends on an

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exceedingly patriarchal note of a man sacrificing himself to save the honor of a woman. Similarly, Bapsi Sidhwa's *Ice-Candy Man* focuses on the broader political theme of the partition of the subcontinent and presents female life in connection with it. Various other female authors' novels follow a similar pattern, e.g., Attia Hossain, Mumtaz Shahnawaz, or more recent texts like those by Shauna Singh Baldwin. Although written from a female perspective, they are still mainly interested in portraying the political and national rather than challenging patriarchal norms. Several of these novels offer a glimpse into the female world, the *Zenana*, before turning their gaze towards the larger political issues of the subcontinent. Without a connection to political themes, women's real, everyday life is almost absent. There seems to be a veil or *purdah* on the female world, which remains unseen. In contrast, Hussain makes a different political choice. By refusing to connect her narrative to the nationalist struggle, she forces the reader to confront the internal politics of the Indian household as a primary site of oppression and resistance. Iqbalunnisa Hussain's *Purdah and Polygamy: The Life in an Indian Household* (1944) is monumental in lifting this 'purdah' to expose how stereotypical ideas of gender, economy, culture, and religion promote patriarchy to oppress and entomb women. Hussain's restricted focus reveals the reality of female life in the early twentieth century and acts as her strategy for exposition and resistance. This focus on the domestic earns her the name "the Jane Austen of Indian literature." Recognizing her importance, Teresa Hubel's article *Dutiful Daughters (or not) and the Sins of the Fathers* (2015) critiques the historiography and canonization of colonial Indian literary history that leaves out important female voices like that of Iqbalunnisa Hussain. Moreover, *The Oxford Handbook of Global Modernisms* deems Hussain's novel as "one of the most striking narratives of its period" (Wollaeger, M. A., & Matt, E., 2012).

Hussain's Realism and Recuperative Methodology

Recovering Hussain as a novelist and her novels, especially the powerful novel *Purdah and Polygamy*, is important to the feminist literature of the subcontinent as she is arguably the first female Muslim novelist who resists patriarchy by exposing it as realistically and truly as possible. Hussain's recuperative project is embodied in her unflinching realism. Through her deft realism, Hussain pointedly combats stereotypical ideas about women in Indian society that still plague most of them today. Recuperating her voice is a vital act of resistance against the male-centered canonization of Indian literature of partition times. Hussain is remarkably

significant in how she presents Zenana and Purdah in the everyday lives of Indian women. Sir Reddy, in the preface, comments that Hussain's novel "gives an insight into Muslim's life within walls, which is a sealed book to most of us" (Hussain, 1944) and that in her novel, "almost for the first time, true Purdah life is depicted with utter realism" (Hussain, 1944). Suvir Kaul, in *Women, Reform and Nationalism*, claims, "Purdah and Polygamy is deeply political in its insistence on identifying two socio-religious practices – purdah and polygamy – that deny women individuality and rights" (Kaul, 2015). These scholars not only point to the merit of Hussain's unparalleled realism and focus on the Zenana but also to the resistance she promotes against the oppression of women within her social, cultural, and religious context.

Review of the Literature

To give you some context, *Purdah and Polygamy* tells the story of Zuhra, a widow, and her son Kabeer, who goes on to marry four wives. A large part of the plot focuses on Zuhra's widowhood and her role as a dictatorial mother-in-law. The rest of the novel revolves around Kabeer and his four wives. Overall, it paints patriarchy as a cruel nexus of gender, culture, economy, and religion that has continually subjugated women for centuries. The purdah over the Zenana has veiled this nexus greatly, and major writers have avoided exposing it.

To elucidate my argument, I will first define Purdah. Usually, Purdah has several interpretations in Islamic ideology, ranging from "complete seclusion, simple veiling or basic modest conduct" (Hubel, 2015). Purdah often means avoiding non-veiled communication with relatives and hiding one's body, hair, and some parts of the face. While Hindu women were able to defy purdah since it was attached to Muslim identity, Muslim women were forced to observe it more than ever. In the subcontinental society, it was usually intermixed with Hindu and Indian cultural beliefs and rituals in the service of patriarchy. However, Hussain presents Purdah as equivalent to stealing the women's identity since the concept is utilized to rob women of any agency or role that necessitates contact with the outside world. Purdah appears as an antithesis of the "personae," the mask that enabled public and political voice to people in Roman law. The women are reduced to "homo" using the purdah, or the rightless, dispensable, lesser beings that Agamben terms 'Zoe' or "bare life." Thus, we are told that Kabeer's second wife "was a girl who would eat crumbs and work like a horse" (Hussain, 1944) or "what more could she want than

food and shelter” (Hussain, 1944). The house they live in is described as a jail, and women are like the inmates with their quarters and routines. The picturization of all the women running to hide when a man enters matches the hassle of inmates on coming of cruel jailers. Hussain’s sarcasm is also evident in the name of the building that acted like a jail for the women, which is called ‘Dilkusha,’ meaning ‘Delightful,’ or ‘Happy Heart.’

The women in the Zenana are not only entombed physically in the four walls of Dilkusha, but they are also buried under the combined weight of cultural and religious ideas of gender and economy in the service of patriarchy. Throughout Hussain’s novel, patriarchal ideas are revealed in the thoughts and words of the women reflecting centuries-deep ideas like “man is superior to woman in every respect” (Hussain, 1944) or that man is the “representative of God on earth, deserves the respect and obedience he demands” (Hussain, 1944), “a woman as a wife should exist for him and him alone” (Hussain, 1944) and that “The greater her submissiveness and her ignorance the greater is the self-importance felt by him” (Hussain, 1944), and countless other patriarchal ideas reinforced and appropriated by culture and religion working together for perpetual subjugation of women. Patriarchy thrives on the submissiveness of women, as well as keeping them ignorant in all matters.

Analysis

Hussain’s novel reveals that the patriarchal world is based on assumed differences or otherness between men and women. This dynamic is supported by the submission of women that feeds men’s egos. Just like oriental and colonial ideas that promote male authority, the woman is represented as the surrogate other, the darker shadow of the male self. The normative power and the social structure are evidenced in the parents’ repeated advice given to Maghbool (the accomplished and educated third wife of Kabeer) about her duties as a wife and woman. Thus, even a highly accomplished woman like Maghbool is subdued and made servile to her husband. So, Hussain sarcastically remarks that “anything cooked should first be eaten by man, the sacred being... After the earning member has had his fill, the women may eat. Even Maghbool held this opinion” (Hussain, 1944). Hussain skillfully portrays the mix of culture, religion, and economy, where man is not only the one with the capital but also the sacred being. The husband, like the Greek sculptor Pygmalion, is the sacred being, given the status of a god for the woman,

especially the wife, and coerces or wants his wife to mold her life the way he wishes. In the Greek myth, Pygmalion is a man who creates an ideal woman, whereas in Hussain's version, we find a system that coerces a woman to conform to a man's ideal, which highlights male fantasy and female subjugation. Hussain uses the term 'the sacred being' to indicate the collaboration between religion and gender in the subjugation of women, as well as to convey irony regarding the status of men. She shows that even educated women internalize patriarchal ideology, pointing to the power exerted by a nexus of religion, patriarchy, culture, and gender on the bodies and minds of women. So, notes Suvir Kaul, "A girl's education is no guarantee against her being treated, on both social and theological grounds, as a liability" (Kaul, 2015) or, in my own words, as a lesser, servile being. The convictions shared across generations and internalized by women act as a diffused but all-encompassing power. This suggests the concept of normative power by Foucault, which embeds discipline in people without coercion.

In the description of the humiliating rituals that Zuhra has to undergo after the death of her husband, the novel most poignantly demonstrates the destructive power of patriarchal control, where economy, culture, gender, and religion all come together to haunt and taunt women. She is told that she is the cause of her husband's death, she is not allowed to touch her husband's body for fear of polluting it, her colorful bangles are smashed, and her colorful dress is taken away and replaced with a widow's whites. She is considered the epitome of evil and ill luck; thus, her face is covered so that no married woman might look at her face and contract bad luck. The public posturing in the form of lavish spending on a several-days-long funeral ceremony is contrasted with the female abjection Zuhra is made to suffer. Soon after, Zuhra is delegated to the hands of his son, who will be her helper and protector after her husband's death. She has double duty as a mother after relinquishing her duties as a wife. Thus, Hussain neatly marks the contours of patriarchal control that encompasses the entirety of female lives.

As Hussain underscores the way culture, economy, and religion promote patriarchy, she likewise complicates these categories as intermingled. For example, the widowhood ceremony of smashing her bangles and taking away her colorful dress is not an Islamic ritual but a convention of the subcontinent, most probably of Hindu origin. But the patriarchy appropriates religion and culture to suit itself better, and where no such white, joyless life is envisioned for widows in Islam, local culture takes over the religion. Refraining Zuhra from touching her husband's

corpse for fear of polluting it is another example of local culture taking over the religion. Without providing an apology for Islam or religion in general, Hussain presents a curious interplay, or rather complicity, of religion and culture in favor of patriarchy. We see that she skillfully exposes how patriarchy orchestrates a blend of religion and culture, reinforcing those religious and cultural practices that subdue women. Thus, Zuhra is told, "What is the life of a woman after her husband? A woman lives for him and him alone. His death should mean the death of all her desires, comfort, and happiness. Even the dogs are shown better consideration" (Hussain, 1944). This statement showcases, on the one hand, the servile life of a wife, but on the other hand, it also contains an ambivalence recurring in Hussain's novel, as the statement conveys not only acquiescence to patriarchal ideology but also despair and outrage at the same time.

Hussain depicts patriarchal control even over women in positions of relative power and agency. The dictatorial behavior of Zuhra towards her daughters-in-law can be explained as this is the first time she has been allowed to assume the role of the master, i.e., man, and she is exercising it in the only way she has known. Zuhra, as a mother-in-law or, more fundamentally, as a mother, attains and exercises some agency. Motherhood gives agency, but to be a mother, you need to be a wife first and then beget children, whether you like it or not. So, any woman who does not succumb to a man first has no agency. When given power, it is mostly over the females under her, i.e., her daughters-in-law. However, this agency and power just reinscribe male-defined traditions and convictions. Hussain demonstrates that even as a mother, "her laws are flexible, specially formulated in the interest of the earning member" (Hussain, 1944), and as a mother-in-law, she believes that a daughter-in-law is brought "to have real and well-earned comfort" (Hussain, 1944). Exposing the illusory agency and power Zuhra enjoys as a mother and mother-in-law, Hussain points out that this illusion also reinscribes and reinforces patriarchal sway. This echoes of 'patriarchal bargain', a term coined by Deniz Kandiyoti in 1988, to explain the situation when women accept and reinforce certain aspects of a patriarchal system to attain personal advantage, like limited power and security. This again exposes a patriarchal matrix that subjugates women and sometimes uses women themselves to control and have surveillance over other women.

The same patriarchal matrix comes into play again when Kabeer searches for his first and second wives. On Kabeer's first marriage, "he was worried about her physical beauty. The question of temperament never struck him. To him, as to all other men,

there is no such thing as temperament in a woman. A woman is supposed to live under any circumstances. Her only needs are food, clothing, and decoration” (Hussain, 1944). For the second marriage, Mustafa, a relative and subordinate to Kabeer, tells him, “I will see that a healthy, obedient, and faithful girl is brought to you” (Hussain, 1944). There you have it: “food, clothing, and decoration,” and “healthy, obedient, and faithful,” suggesting a convergence of gender that denies women any role and needs beyond food, clothing, and shelter, a culture that wants them to be obedient under any circumstances, and religion that demands unwavering loyalty, submissiveness, and service from them.

Furthermore, how wealth is used to control women is represented by Mustafa’s statements about status. He says to Kabeer, “No rich girl can be obedient and loyal to you” (Hussain, 1944). Later in the novel, we are also told, “To give money to a woman is to give a dagger to her” (Hussain, 1944). Rich girls were subjugated by depriving them of their economic independence and by the normative power of the culture and religion. For example, for the third wife, Maghbool, her father keeps the condition of transferring a building in her name and a large amount as her Mahar (the amount a husband is obligated to pay to his wife as soon as possible after marriage), knowing that financial status and stability matter if a woman wants to be independent. Nevertheless, her economic independence is taken away by the normative force of culture, religion, and gender. Religious fear is used to control her as she is told that “the woman who makes her husband sorry goes to the Seventh Hell where the fire burns eternally” (Hussain, 1944). She is further preached to be “his shadow” so that “she goes to heaven by serving him” (Hussain, 1944). Maghbool ends up surrendering a significant portion of her financial resources to Kabeer. Hussain vividly delineates that through religious fear and ideas of feminine submissiveness, even women with financial resources of their own are kept away from handling money and financial matters to keep the inheritance intact as a male privilege.

Despite all odds, Hussain’s female characters do not give up without a struggle and show remarkable instances of agency. The various wives of Kabeer convert their oppressed positions and disadvantages into acts of agency to get themselves some venues of comfort. Munira, the dark, ugly, and poor second wife, utilizes her physical strength and mental toughness at work. She works tirelessly to win her mother-in-law’s and her sister-in-law’s heart. She also dents into her husband’s rough attitude and indifference towards her by her skillful cooking and unwavering

obedience. On the surface, Munira's actions do not look like the exercise of agency, but readers must be sensitive to the restrictions placed on her; she does her best to make her life livable under the constraints of patriarchal control. Maghbool, before her marriage, uses literature, singing, and poetry to convey her grief, sorrow, and disappointment in her father. But the cause and message of her poetic lamentations go unnoticed, much like the cause and message behind the suicide of Bhuvaneswari in Spivak's *Can the Subaltern Speak*. Like Bhuvaneswari's suicide is not 'heard' or properly 'interpreted', Maghbool's art also exemplifies a form of communication that the patriarchal system is structurally incapable of 'hearing' or interpreting correctly. Whether noticed or not, art becomes her refuge and an act of agency in the face of a miserable life, and its value lies in the act of expression itself, not in its reception. Her song and writing grant her a sense of agency and protest her subjugation.

Conclusion

Ultimately, the different wives of Kabeer gradually form solidarity as they care for each other, supporting each other in some way to alleviate their distress and discomfort. Munira is helped and cared for by Maghbool when she is delivering her baby and when everyone ignores her as if she does not even exist. Similarly, the seasoned cook, Munira, helps Maghbool in her ordeal of cooking for Kabeer and nitpicky Zuhra. Small acts of solidarity and support dampen the effects of patriarchal oppression they face every day. In a situation when they cannot evade the daily drudgery themselves, they exercise the little agency they have and help each other. While they do not completely 'love' being wives to the same man, they possess more empathy and support than the husband who 'owns' them all, to the extent that Maghbool remains hungry to feed Munira when there is not enough food left for two people.

In conclusion, Hussain's picturization, her attention to minute details, her irony and ambivalence, her masterly portrayal of the unseen world of the Zenana, and her deliberate narrative focus are the major stylistic choices that help her resist patriarchy. She does not gloss over or romanticize female life as she is an intense realist and does not gaze at the Zenana with a superficial, outsider gaze. Rather, she presents minuscule details of the life and mind of a typical Indian Muslim household, especially the dark chambers of the Zenana. Within the hidden labyrinths of those dark chambers, Hussain paints patriarchy as an evil nexus of

masculine ideas of gender, economy, culture, and religion, suppressing women. Although the novel ends on a pessimistic note, leaving most of its female characters entangled in the patriarchal matrix, neither those women nor Iqbalunnisa Hussain acquiesce without a struggle. Hussain's work thus not only delivers a vibrant historical document but also operates as a methodological model for contemporary scholars, reminding us that the act of observing keenly the domestic and the everyday remains a potent tool for dismantling deep-rooted systems of power, like patriarchy.

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