

The Portrayal of the Muslim Woman in Qurratulain Hyder's *Fireflies in the Mist* and *The Housing Society*

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Abstract

Qurratulain Hyder, the successor of Ismat Chughtai in Urdu fiction, focusses largely on the upper crust of the Muslim society in her novels. The Muslim women she depicts are posited in a world in the throes of transition, the turbulent times of the Independence struggle and Partition, in which Hyder herself grew up. This paper focuses on the portrayal of the Muslim woman in two of Hyder's novels, *Fireflies in the Mist* (1994) and *The Housing Society* (1999). Purdah, which conceals the body of the Muslim woman, is also an ideology which demarcates the boundaries of the Muslim woman's space and defines her sexual morality. The first-generation Muslim women characters Hyder portrays have mostly internalized the purdah norms of passivity, obedience and deference to elders as the ideal virtues of a Muslim girl. However, thanks to socio-political compulsions, these women gradually move away from purdah-enforced physical confinement and seclusion. The emancipation of the first-generation women from the physical purdah paves the way for more radical changes in the lives of the second-generation women. The disillusionment, uncertainty and guilt characteristic of the women caught between tradition and modernity do not torment the lives of the new generation women who throw conventions to the wind.

Keywords: Muslim, purdah, zenana, Hyder, feudal, aristocracy

The minority status of the Muslim community and the consequent heightened emphasis on religious identity heavily impact on the status of the Indian Muslim woman. According to Denize Kandiyote, men and women negotiate their religious identity differently. Men, on account of their participation in the public domain, are required to make compromises with religious codes and norms. Women, on the other hand, are considered the custodians of cultural identity because they are less assimilated linguistically and culturally into the wider society (quoted in Hasan xii-xiii). In India, the Muslim woman's fidelity to religious values becomes the basis for the judgement of community identity. The Muslim woman's deference to/enslavement by tradition and orthodox religious patriarchy has figured prominently in Urdu novels and short stories featuring Indian Muslim life. This paper focuses on the portrayal of the Indian Muslim woman in two novels of the acclaimed Urdu writer Qurratulain Hyder – *Fireflies in the Mist* (1994) and *The Housing Society* (1999).

Qurratulain Hyder, Ismat Chughtai's successor in Urdu fiction, was born and brought up in an educated, liberal and enlightened atmosphere and lived in a period characterized by momentous socio-political changes. The Muslim women she depicts in her fiction too are posited in a world in the throes of transition. The Independence struggle, the attainment of

Independence and the Partition form the background of most of her works. Hailing from a predominantly anglicized landowning Muslim aristocratic family, Hyder largely focuses on the upper crust of society in her fictional world.

Women are the protagonists in both the texts selected for analysis here. *Fireflies in the Mist*, which spans the four decades from the Bengali extremist movement of the 1930s to the creation of Bangladesh in 1971 and *The Housing Society*, a novella set against the backdrop of Partition and its aftermath of divided families. *Fireflies in the Mist* is a multi-centred narrative. It revolves round the lives of three girls – Deepali Sarkar, Rosie Bannerjee and Jehan Ara – who serve as windows to the Hindu, Christian and Muslim communities of East Bengal. *The Housing Society* features three Muslim families – the Mirzas, representing the anglicized elites and those of Buta Begum and Jamshed, both representing the peasant class.

The socio-political turmoil of the world outside does not even have the slightest repercussion on the life of the aristocratic Muslim women at Arjumand Manzil, Jehan Ara's home. While Deepali and Rosie plunge into the Communist Movement with revolutionary fervour, Jehan Ara lives in "the tranquil safety of her little palace", harbouring romantic illusions of a life with Rehan Ahmed (FM 100). The male members of the Muslim aristocracy are shown as anglicized. The Nawabs took English women as wives. However, they severely curtail the freedom of the girls and deny them the right to selfhood. They regard the women only as men's possessions. Jehan Ara's father, Qamrul Zaman resents higher education and unbridled freedom for girls. He never allows his daughters to leave the house unchaperoned. "Girls shouldn't become too clever. It complicates life for them. They become unhappy. I wouldn't like Jehan Ara to join the university. Too much knowledge would unsettle her" (FM 137).

Purdah, the institution of female seclusion popularised by Islam, is both a garment, concealing the Muslim woman from sight, as well as an ideology which demarcates the boundaries of the Muslim woman's space and defines her sexual morality. The physical forms of purdah observance include spatial separation, the wearing of special garments, several kinds of portable seclusion in which women can move about in public, and certain kinds of body language such as lowering the eyes (Papanek "Caging the Lion" 63). The Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology gives two meanings for purdah – a curtain meant especially to screen women from sight and the system of seclusion of Indian women. The figurative meanings of the word include "secrecy, privacy, modesty; seclusion, concealment, reticence, reserve" (Dictionary of Urdu). Hyder lays bare the complicity of the women in the perpetuation of the purdah. Jehan Ara's mother, Anwari Begum, echoes her husband's views. Girls "ought to know the difference between a needle and a spade [...] before they get married!" (FM 143). She exerts her authority to deprive Jehan Ara of her legitimate rights, which her religion enunciates. It is at her special interest that Jehan Ara is married to a widower. Anwari Begum vetoes the *moulvi's* suggestion that a clause be inserted in the marriage contract giving the wife the prior right to divorce. She also fumes at the *moulvi's* insistence that Jehan Ara speak out her consent. "[...] She is too shy to raise her voice. She has said yes. Do you want her to shout from the rooftop?" (FM 243). Hyder makes an aside on the discrepancy between the theoretical and actual status of the Muslim woman and the un-Islamic practices taken over from the Hindus to the disadvantage of the Muslim woman. According to Muslim law, a girl must explicitly express her consent for the marriage. But "in India customarily she does not even utter a word. To speak would be the height of immodesty on her part. Therefore, she merely nods or remains silent which is supposed to be the sign of

her consent” (FM 242-43). An ideal Muslim girl should not seek divorce. If widowed, she should break her glass bangles and wear the widow’s sari. Jehan Ara’s grandmother, Lady Nurul Zaman Chowdhry, is another woman who colludes in women’s oppression. Her façade of progressivism stands sheared in her cruel treatment of Maliha, her niece.

By placing the women of different communities side by side, Hyder comments on the disparity in opportunities for them. “Imprisoned within the fortress of her religious feudal-cultural pressures” Jehan Ara has no say in her education or marriage, whereas, Rosie, her Christian friend, joins the university for her Master’s Degree in Economics and marries outside her religion (FM 101). Deepali seeks intellectual and emotional fulfilment in her work as a communist revolutionary. Jehan Ara, on the other hand, occupies herself, knitting booties and dreaming; she feels circumscribed, but is unable to articulate her aspirations. She has internalized the purdah norms of passivity, obedience and deference to elders as the ideal virtues of a Muslim girl. Shocked at Rosie’s bold refusal of the match her parents find for her, she says: “When my marriage is fixed by my father, I’ll merely bow my head and say, yes” (FM 99). When Rehan suggests elopement, she is scandalized. Hyder captures Jehan Ara’s unhappiness and frustration at the intellectual, emotional and sexual deprivation, which distinguish her from the Muslim woman of the previous generation who happily and uncomplainingly accepted the purdah norms. Maliha, Rehan Ahmed’s mother, does not murmur even a word of protest against her unjust uncle or aunt who misappropriate her father’s property and marry her off to a poor *moulvi*. She accepts it as her destiny and remains utterly devoted to her husband till her death. Disciplined to be patient and dutiful, these women take their hardships for granted.

The tyranny and oppression of the Muslim feudal aristocracy transcend the boundaries of class. In *The Housing Society* Hyder recounts the harrowing experience of a poor Muslim peasant family at the hands of a wealthy and influential Nawab whose lascivious eyes fall on Basanti Begum, the beautiful girl-child of the family. The sixty-five year old Nawab Sikandar Quli Khan, alias Nawab Bhure, has many wives, lawful and unlawful and is given to all vices, immoralities and frivolities. He abducts Basanti, imprisons her in the fortress of Durgakund for six months and murders her brother. However, Buta Begum, Basanti’s widowed mother, files a petition, conducts her case from behind the purdah and wins it with the support of the Mirzas, the Collector Sahib and his wife.

The term purdah has a semantic kinship with *zenana*, a term denoting the female quarter of a house. Rituals, an inseparable part of the *zenana* atmosphere, play an important role in the lives of the poor women too. The dances performed as part of the festivities at childbirth have an erotic nature. While the professional dancer who performs before the men comes close to nudging them with her hips, the dancer in the women’s quarters, “her face veiled with her *odhri*, was dancing with her hands aggressively placed on her hips” (HS 201). The *aqiqa*, the formal name-giving ceremony among the Muslims, is observed with customary gaiety. A *dholak* is placed in the courtyard where women gather to sing. Such traditional ceremonies enliven the sad, dreary lives of the poor women.

The purdah society fixes unequal standards for its men and women; its norms are highly discriminatory. Tutored in the virtues of obedience and self-effacement, like Maliha and Jehan Ara, Manzurun-Nisa puts up with the injustices perpetrated on her at her conjugal home, without demur. Once Jamshed moves up the social ladder, his country-bred wife ceases to hold any attraction for him and he divorces Manzurun-Nisa soon after their first child is born. He soon establishes himself as a business magnate and carries on liaisons with many women. When Jamshed drops in eleven years later, Manzurun-Nisa has to observe

purdah from him, for, he is a *na-mahram*, i.e., a marriageable male. "To be seen by him would be a sin – a great sin" (HS 222). She even has to forfeit the right to her child. Jamshed takes away their daughter, Farhatun-Nisa to educate her. Thanks to the modern education she receives, Farhatun-Nisa grows into a fashionable woman and repudiates all ties with the past. Deserted by her husband and child, Manzurun-Nisa does not live long. In Begum Mirza's life marriage serves as a liberating influence. Though she comes of British stock (her grandfather was an Englishman who married a Nawab's daughter) she has lived in strict purdah till her marriage. Her husband brings her out of the purdah; nevertheless she leads a mentally cloistered life. Traditional, superstitious, fatalistic and class-conscious, she disapproves of her son, Salman's love for Surayya. "Bhayya needs a girl who will look after his comfort and meals, and not some intellectual, socialist, 'artist-shamartist'" (HS 215). Besides marriage, socio-political compulsions precipitate the dismantling of the purdah for the Muslim woman. Buta Begum who has spent the larger part of her life behind the purdah is forced to come out of it under changed circumstances. Her daughter decides to move to Karachi in the wake of Partition; there Buta Begum has to supervise the construction of her house, meet the contractors and the workers and run errands. Finding the *burqa* to be an encumbrance, she puts it away and instead covers her head with the end of her sari.

The emancipation of the first-generation women from the physical purdah paves the way for more radical changes in the lives of the second-generation women. Basanti Begum survives her childhood travails, secures higher education, becomes an accomplished painter and is successfully employed. She abandons her name, which is a constant reminder of her painful childhood and assumes the name Surayya Husain. Buta Begum's role in Surayya's transformation from a hapless victim of feudal exploitation to a self-reliant woman should not be undervalued. She has to forego the whole of her wealth and possession in her fight against the Nawab, a formidable rival for a woman of her status.

Begum Mirza, though bound by tradition, is not against educating her daughter. It is her education that helps Salma pull through in the times of hardship, which her family is thrown into, following Partition riots. Partition, the consequent displacement and the crumbling away of the social and financial security unsettle Salma and she finds it hard to shed the trappings of power and wealth. However, she swallows her pride, accepts the job of a personal secretary in Jamshed's firm and provides her family the much-needed anchor and support. Hyder shows how age-old inhibitions are shattered under the sheer weight of need. However, Salma loses her job when her aristocratic lineage is revealed. The past is an insurmountable force in Hyder's novels.

For a Muslim woman, breaking away from tradition is accompanied by guilt and self-doubt. Yasmin Majid in *Fireflies in the Mist* flouts the traditional codes set by her orthodox Muslim family of Syeds and clerics to become a dancer. She gives up "the prospects of a safe and mundane marriage", leaves for Europe and marries Gerald Belmont, an English fashion designer (FM 262). Her father promptly disowns her; soon, her homosexual husband abandons her and refuses to pay her alimony arguing that they were not married under the British law. Yasmin drifts from job to degrading job only to find herself spurned by her own daughter and shunned by her erstwhile compatriots. Racked by guilt she ultimately commits suicide. Her diary titled 'Good Luck Diary' is a sad commentary on her luckless life. Her daughter Scheherzade attributes Yasmin's tragedy to the conflicting pulls of her Bengali-Pakistani-Muslim background and the Western attitudes she tried to adopt. "The inner collision shattered her" (FM 301). The anglicized Muslim male, on the other hand, does not have to face ostracism. The Nawabs of the nineteenth century, Syed Ahmed Ali, for instance,

took English wives and got them converted to Islam. But for a Muslim woman of the twentieth century, marrying outside her religion can be suicidal.

The disillusionment, uncertainty and guilt characteristic of the women caught between tradition and modernity do not torment the lives of the new generation women who throw conventions to the wind. Yasmin's daughter Scheherzade pays no respect to time-honoured ideals and institutions. She finds nothing embarrassing or scandalising about being a nude model: "I do not understand why you people had attached so much importance to the simple act of wearing or taking off one's clothes. Why such hoo-ha about the human anatomy? I am a successful nude model and I am not a whore. I am just a liberated healthy normal young woman" (FM 302). In Nasira Najmus Sahar Qadiri (whose name means Victorious Morning Star) Hyder presents a truly activist, self-actualising woman. She turns against her opportunistic uncle Rehan and remains committed to the struggle for justice, though traumatized by the mindless rape and carnage during the Bangladesh War of Liberation. She works as a teacher of political science at the college where Deepali, Rosie and Jehan Ara studied. She belongs to the "rude, cheeky, angry new" generation (FM 327). She combines in herself Yasmin's vitality and Deepali's revolutionary zeal (Asaduddin, "The All-Embracing Mind" 181).

Hyder's preoccupation with history sometimes divests her characters of their human appeal. However, there are characters like Jehan Ara and Yasmin Majid who are highly individualized. Hyder delineates different faces of Muslim womanhood. Some like Jehan Ara, Maliha and Manzurun-Nisa remain within the purdah and are victims of oppressive tradition and/or patriarchal tyranny; some like Buta Begum and Begum Mirza emerge out of the physical purdah thanks to marriage or social pressures but still remain prisoners of tradition; certain others like Yasmin Majid and Surayya Begum either flout restrictive familial and societal norms or brave odds to make a space for themselves. The liberation from purdah-confinement is mostly achieved at the cost of happiness and human ties.

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