

Language, Politics and Practice of Purdah in Twentieth Century Indian Women Writers

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Matthew Arnold in a *sari*, is what Gordon Bottomley¹ called Indian Writing in English and there were many like him who questioned its value and validity in the early years of its mushrooming. W.B Yeats² urged Indian writers to write in their own languages since “no man can think/write with music and vigour except in his mother tongue” (520). It was with the unselfconscious use of English by social reformers and nationalists like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Tilak, Gokhale and Aurobindo that English became one of the many voices of India, “as much Indian as the others” (Iyengar 3). In comparison with those writing in the vernacular, the Indian English writers were uncertain about the nature of their readership. English being the language of power and privilege, the implicit readership of IWE was the British reader residing in England or colonial administrators in India, “The authorising presence of this shadowy reader is intermittently perceived in details of ethnographic documentation or through lexical or semantic emphases” (Mukherjee 92). Although one witnesses ethnographic documentation in the writings of Rama Mehta and Attia Hosain, one also needs to acknowledge that English played a crucial role in the democratisation of the upper and middle classes since it “helped the people to overcome historical barriers of knowledge and communication” (Ilaiyah).

Home was a highly charged ideological space in the twentieth century and the centrality of this architectural trope could be seen in the way the nation was imagined as a home that had been tainted by the arrival of strangers. Sarojini Naidu³, as President of the Indian National Congress declared in 1925,

Mine, as becomes a woman, is a modest domestic programme: merely to restore India to her true position of supreme mistress in her own house, sole guardian of her vast resources, and sole dispenser of her own rich hospitalities as a loyal daughter of *Bharat Mata*.

Therefore it will be my lovely, though difficult, task through the coming year to try to set my mother’s house in order; to reconcile the tragic quarrels that threaten the integrity of her old history, joint family, the life of diverse communities and creeds; and to find an adequate place, purpose and recognition; alike for the lowliest and mightiest of her children and foster children, the guests and the strangers within her gates.

There is a distinctive form of tension between public and private realities in women’s writing (Tharu and Lalita) and it is this conflict between the inner and outer, home and the world that the engagement with purdah addresses. Thus, instead of pitting English and the vernaculars against each other, the operative conjunction should be ‘and’ to see the “co-existence and concurrence, however uneasy.” With a focus on the negotiation with purdah in selected writings of Rasheed Jahan, Ismat Chughtai, Rama Mehta and Attia Hosain, the paper attempts to vernacularise English by “righting the asymmetrical

balances of power between English and the other Indian languages (Paranjape xi) and also strives to see if and how the choice of language governs the representations of the behavioural codes that purdah entails.

Purdah, an “ambivalent and shifting signifier” (Grace 1) is used to refer to “elaborate codes of seclusion and feminine modesty used to protect and control the lives of women” (De Souza xi). Purdah, veil, *ghunghat* and burqa are some of the words which are used in various parts of South Asia to refer to a complex of behaviour associated with honour, shame and modesty. Although, it is often used to refer to the clothing norms of Muslim women, it is practised by various communities in South Asia. The practice varies not only from culture to culture but within the life span of the same woman since pre-adolescent and post-menopausal women are seen as sexually neutral and thus, not needing purdah.

The ‘condition of women’ novel emerged in the 1870s with the works of Nazir Ahmad and Rashidul Khairi. The condition of women, especially the issue of purdah and education were discussed and debated in women’s journals such as *Tahzib un Niswan*, *Khatoon* and *Ismat*. Rasheed Jahan, who was notoriously called ‘Rasheed Jahan *Angareywali*’ wrote about issues that were considered taboo, such as the impact on women of the constraints imposed by purdah. She closely observed the debilitating influence of purdah through the struggles of her parents, Shaikh and Begam Abdullah in their attempts to establish a school for girls, “*sub se zyada rona parda ka tha aur iss bahas mein auratein bhi hissa le rahin theen,*” (211) says Shaikh Abdullah in his autobiography. Victorian norms of domesticity served as a model for the education of women which had a dual purpose, the attempt to make women better wives and mothers and to ensure cultural continuity. Minault cites a verse by Akbar Allahabadi, recited by a student in a madrasa, which is symptomatic of the times,

*Ta’lim auraton ki zaruri to hai, magar
Khatun-i-khana hon, vo sabha ki pari nah hon*
(Education is necessary for women, no doubt
But let them be ‘angels in the house’, not social gadabouts.) (253)

Shaikh Abdullah, Begam Abdullah, Mumtaz Ali, Muhibb-i-Husain and many others campaigned for a reform in the practice of purdah by arguing that the way in which it was followed was excessive and did not adhere to the shari’i purdah. Rasheed Jahan and her sisters were educated at the institution founded by her parents but it was her training in obstetrics which brought her face to face with the horrifying condition of women, “In progressive families she became a symbol of the emancipated woman; in conservative homes an example of all the worst that can occur if a woman is educated, not kept in purdah and allowed to pursue a career” (Coppola and Zubair 170).

Purdah, as indicated by Rasheed Jahan was used to seclude ‘respectable’ ladies from not only men but prostitutes as well, “We should observe parda from that vile creature” says the narrator’s colleague in “That One” (119). Ahmadi Begum, a character in Jahan’s short story “Mute” takes great pride in the fact that not even their closest relatives had set eyes on her daughter. Despite the political, social and cultural turmoil of the twentieth century, the walls of the zenana were insurmountable,

A new wave is said to be coursing through every nook and corner of Delhi; yet you will still find homes where no storms brew and no earthquakes tremor. The same old traditions, the same men’s quarters in the outer part of the house where a crowd assembles each evening and the same confines of the women’s seclusion” (146).

Rasheed Jahan's story, "A Visit to Delhi" narrates the unfulfilled promise of a journey of Malka Begum from Faridabad to Delhi. The burqa clad Malka Begum is the first among her friends to have undertaken this journey, thus revealing the "complete lack of *sair-o-tafri* (leisure travel) in the lives of women" (Jalil 36). She is left alone by her husband when he found an acquaintance and the burqa whose ostensible purpose was to guard women from strangers, makes her even more conspicuous and turns her into an enigmatic and alluring creature:

And I, perched on the luggage, wrapped in a burqa, there I sat. First, this damned burqa then these cursed men. Men are anyway no good but when they see a woman sitting like this they just circle around her. There is no opportunity even to chew paan. One damn fellow coughs, another hurls a remark. And I...breathless with fear. (*Parwaaz* 1)

A similar distressing experience is narrated by Chughtai in *The Crooked Line* when Shaman observes men making inappropriate gestures at burqa clad women on the platform, "Standing on the platform were many burka clad figures playing football with the crippled intellects of these men. Close by was a bride, who, her veil lowered, was engaged in bombarding them" (233). The insidious and surreptitious nature of purdah values do now allow Malka Begum to consider the possibility of shedding the veil, "Did I go all the way to show my face to these wretches?", she argues in "A Visit to Delhi." After being abandoned by her husband, shoved and ogled at by men at the platform she insists on being taken back to Faridabad, "I have had enough of this 'visit to Delhi.' May no one ever go with you, not even to paradise" (2).

The conventions of purdah not only veil and seclude women, they also cast a veil over discussions about the female body, sex, marital rape, pregnancy etc. and it is this veil that Jahan raises in her writings through a scathing indictment of the custom and practise of seclusion of women. Rasheed Jahan's play, *Behind the Veil* goes behind the veil into the domestic space by making the readers eavesdrop on a conversation between Muhammadi and Aftab. Muhammadi, a thirty-two-year old married woman who belongs to an orthodox, respectable Muslim family residing in Old Delhi, looks much older than her age and is "tired of life" (De Souza 463). She talks of the insatiable sexual appetite of her husband who satiated his lust through her even when she was ill, she had to get her teeth removed because her husband complained that her mouth smelt:

My womb and my lower parts had fallen. I got it put right so that he could get the same pleasure again as he'd got from a newly-married wife. But when a woman has a baby every year how *can* she stay in good shape? It slipped down again. And then he went on at me and threatened me until he got me butchered again. And even then he wasn't satisfied. (471)

It is immediately after this horrifying account that the women hear the call for prayer from the mosque but the call does not offer them any solace, instead it hints at the abuse of religion to banish women and persecute them.

Ismat Chughtai, one of the most vocal Urdu writers of her times, a member of the Progressive Writers Association and one of the first significant writers in Urdu to talk in an unrestrained manner about female sexuality, came from the landed aristocracy. She wrote about this class which had received the benefits of western education but it did not drastically change the patterns and customs of the family. In several cases, it was the men in the family who urged women to drop the veil thus, indicating that the act of unveiling was more about being obedient daughters and wives and less about a defiance of others' expectations, "The decision to leave purdah involved a lot of intra-family

diplomacy" (Minault 94). Chughtai recounts in her autobiography that her brother Azim Beg Chughtai, who was a vociferous critic of purdah once brought his friend in front of his unveiled wife, for which he faced criticism and scorn, "Dulhan Bhabhi's brothers had got wind of it and declared that if their sister was forced to break purdah and made to dance in the marketplace they would decapitate both their sister and her husband" (51). She also talks of the varied nature of observance of purdah by the Agarwals and Oswals as the young women always went out in large groups with their heads covered by a shawl held by maids on either side of the group and the older women placed the dupatta on the head and let it hang over the back. The manner of observing purdah also varied with age, class and community as genteel women wore shawls like Hindu women while women who belonged to the community of tailors and dyers did not have purdah.

In a manner similar to Rasheed Jahan, Chughtai exposed the conflict between "proclaimed public morality and private and personal urges" (Asaduddin 81). She shows through her stories how the behavioural codes of purdah did not allow an honest articulation of feelings and desires, compelling people to take recourse to hypocrisy and deception. *The Crooked Line* while narrating the vicissitudes of Shaman's life shows that even when purdah was not enforced, boys and girls sat separately, "Since, they were all quite a distance away there was a sort of purdah between the two groups." Chughtai depicts the erotic games played between *sherwanis* and *burqas* to show how the veil is enforced to separate men and women and mediates their interaction and sexual desire;

At every stall there's a crowd of black *sherwanis* and black *burqas*. The *sherwanis* don't have the nerve to stay away from the shadow of the *burqas*; if you're buying earrings, they're present, if you're sifting through bangles, they're pushing through with their hands...In short, they're everywhere, hissing, the *koriyale*. As for the girls, they are bewildered and confused; if they complain they would be prohibited from coming, which means they're helpless. However, the world is hostile and desolate without the *koriyale*. What is left in the exhibition that is of interest if you reproach them and send them away? (88)

According to Chughtai, purdah bred unhealthy desires because of curiosity and unfulfilled longings which thrived purely on imagination. With the removal of the veil and unconstrained interaction between men and women, "The possibility of blind love gets reduced and life can be built on surer foundations" (155).

Purdah, is not just a garment that conceals a woman's face, chest, hair or the entire body, it also encapsulates a construction and division of space on the basis of social relations revealing the spatialisation of the social and socialisation of the spatial. Space which is seen in a dichotomous relationship with time is often relegated to the domain of stasis and passivity, something which is outside history and politics. Time is aligned with, "History, Progress, Civilization, Science, Politics and Reason, portentous things with gravitas and capital letters. With space on the other hand, are aligned the other poles of these concepts: stasis, reproduction, nostalgia, emotions, aesthetics, the body" (Massey 257). The binary of space and time constitutes and is constituted by the construction of masculinity and femininity. To rescue the spatial from passivity and depoliticisation and to outline the understanding that gender and geography are deeply constitutive of each other, enables a critique of essentialist identities. The division of space into public and private is one of the most significant dimensions of the "joint control of spatiality and *identity*" (179). The home which is intimately bound with the cultural and ideological category of 'woman' reverberates with cultural and spiritual values, nostalgia, security and solace. Rama Mehta argues in *The Western Educated Hindu Woman*,

that for the social and economic elite of the country if "Pativrata was the moral code, the Purdha system was part of the feminine code of modesty" (19). Mehta, a sociologist and novelist, like her heroine Geeta in *Inside the Haveli* was an outsider turned insider since she, who was one of the first women to have joined India's Foreign Service, resigned from her position after marriage. The novel charts Geeta's journey from Bombay to the "wall-enclosed havelis" (5) of Udaipur which are an enigma to outsiders who are not given even a glimpse into the lived realities of its inhabitants. Sangram Singhji's haveli is one such haveli that was built three hundred years ago;

The haveli may have no shape from the outside, but inside there is a definite plan. The courtyards divide the haveli into various sections. The separation of self-contained units was necessary because the women of Udaipur kept purdah. Their activities were conducted within their apartments. The courtyards connected their section with that of the men. The etiquette established through the years permitted only close male relatives to enter the women's apartment. Even so no man entered the courtyard without being properly announced. (6)

Space in the haveli was divided and assigned according to two principles, gender and class. Spacious rooms, rooms around the courtyard and lower floors were given to those who were higher up in the familial hierarchy. *Inside the Haveli* is Geeta's bildungsroman but the novel also shows the lives of women who worked in the haveli, such as Lakshmi and Pari whose movements were not as constrained as those of their mistresses but they were also governed by the purdah code. Geeta was told by her mother to "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" (16), indicating how purdah encapsulates various intra and inter family interaction and avoidance rules. The behavioural codes did not allow a spontaneous display of affection, even towards one's children, "They covered their emotions in an elaborate exchange of formal gestures and words" (32). In the first few months of her marriage, Geeta found the separation of men and women "romantic, full of mystery" (21), a world starkly different from the world of her parents where there was a free mingling of the sexes. The purdah code applied to both men and women as men were reduced to the status of "night visitors" (184), although Ajay could visit Geeta during the day but these visits were either ridiculed or frowned upon. Mehta also notes the generational differences in the way purdah was followed by representing the discontent and dissatisfaction of the younger generation that could not completely abandon or embrace the ways of the haveli;

They seemed like little canaries in a cage who sang and twittered but seemed to know no passion. Their large eyes full of yearning and longing looked dreamily on the world beyond from behind their veils. Though young, some unknown fear seemed to have eaten away their natural exuberance. They followed the traditions of their families at the bidding of their elders, but they lacked the same faith or commitment to it. It seemed to Geeta that they were waiting for the day when they would be freed from their confinement. But on the surface they showed no dissatisfaction. In fact, Geeta longed to feel their placid acceptance of life. (87)

Unlike Geeta, her mother-in-law and the women of her generation had a shared past and an immense pride in the traditions of the past which guarded them from the outside world. The noise of the haveli which Geeta saw as an intrusion into her privacy did not bother her mother-in-law because "silence she could not bear" (48). Neighbours and maids from other havelis came to seek her advice, participate in rituals and share gossip. To an outsider, the life of a purdah clad woman is one of "hermetically sealed

respectability" (Minault 108) but a closer look indicates that life inside the zenana involves a lot of socialisation, participation in rituals and celebrations, arranging marriages, preserving cultural values and heritage and visits to a complex and wide network of families. The courtyard was a space abuzz with conversations and activity, harbouring "lives which may have been claustrophobic, but they were rich in human contact" (111).

Geeta, through the classes she starts for the maids of the haveli and their children, transforms the haveli into a haven of knowledge and learning but when the community shuns these classes and raises questions about the dignity of the haveli, Geeta is as indignant as her mother-in-law, "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 that it holds. Where else in the world would I get this kind of love and concern? The children must grow up here. They must learn to love and respect this ancient house" (170). The rage and resentment that she feels at receiving a marriage proposal of Vir Singh for her teenage daughter, Vijay turns into a recognition of the merits of the proposal since Vir Singh was from a royal family, was of good character and going abroad for further studies. The novel ends with the death of Geeta's mother-in-law and Geeta becomes the mistress of the haveli, entrusted with preserving and keeping alive the traditions of the haveli.

Attia Hosain was born in Lucknow in 1913 in a taluqdari (landholders in the Mughal and later British Empire, responsible for collecting taxes from various districts) family. She received an English liberal education at La Martiniere and Isabella Thoburn College. She was the first woman from a taluqdari family to graduate. The Indian National struggle and Progressive Writers' Group were some of the seminal influences on her which inspired her to become a journalist, broadcaster and writer. Hosain's *Sunlight on a Broken Column* looks at the changes in the fortunes of a group of taluqdari families because of Western education and the Partition of the subcontinent. Partition narratives while talking of the materiality of home show how spatial categories are intertwined with social categories and how "influential architectural idioms can be of the practice of remembering" (Burton 102). Laila, the protagonist of the novel is an orphan, thus, both an inhabitant and observer, whose "peripatetic vision" lingers over various spaces in Ashiana, the family home (Guha). The novel begins with a foreboding of Baba Jan's death by associating it with the movement of aunt Abida from the zenana to the guest room, "The day my aunt Abida moved from the zenana into the guest room off the corridor that led to the men's wing of the house, within call of her father's room, we knew Baba Jan had not much longer to live" (14). Their were men from whom purdah was observed, for instance, Noor Khan who had been in the household for three years, whereas from Jumman and his father before him, purdah was not observed since they had worked for the family since boyhood. Mushtari Bai who was a courtesan and had taught courtesy and etiquettes to generations of taluqdaras was also given access to the zenana. While the world of the zenana was an enclosed, self-contained unit, the living room was a permeable space which resonated with voices, music, footsteps and shadows. The attempt to govern the behaviour of girls is evident in the visible veil behind which they were supposed to hide and the purdah of the mind which is created through myths, behavioural norms and admonishments. Zahra who prayed five times a day, read the Qur'an daily, did sewing and knitting embodies purdah values while Laila is often reprimanded for her fascination with books and a "mehsaab's education" (23). It is a world where Abida who was well versed in Persian poetry and Arabic theology is treated with disdain and sarcasm by others. Zainab, Laila's cousin tells her about a bride who was bitten by a centipede during the ceremony of

seeing the face of the bride but she didn't move an inch. The girls were conditioned to emulate the behaviour of the bride who suffered in silence but did not let others see her face. The anxiety about being unveiled is so deeply ingrained that it has a hold over Laila even beyond the grave, "And then inside me was a cold, paralysed horror because his eyes were open and he was looking at me. He was dead, he should have been dead. Yet he was looking at me. I had not covered my head, I had not raised my hand in salutation, and I could not" (82-3). Even when purdah is shed, the change could be a merely superficial change as happened in the case of Hamid's wife, Saira whose clothes, hair, cigarette holder and high-heeled shoes seemed like "fancy dress" to Laila. In part IV, Laila returns to Ashiana, a "living symbol" of her life (273) and recollects the momentous changes that altered the lives of the taluqdars and Muslims after the Partition.

Laila's angle of vision constantly leads us away from the zenana into the concentric circles of Muslim and European culture in the public spaces of the house such as the living room. Rama Mehta and Attia Hosain depicted the contradictions in the lives of Indian women in the context of colonial modernity by using the home as an archival source to record their own histories. The focus on the materiality of home and women's place in it not only helps in bridging the gap between discourse and 'reality', it also critiques the "facile notion of home itself" (Burton 5). Burton argues that those who speak of belonging to a temporal or spatial imaginary such as a home overestimate the desire for belonging and underplay the troubled and fraught relationship that women have with it (132). Ashiana is a treasure trove of memories for Laila but it is a home which she is "ready to leave now" as she says at the end of the novel (319). Laila's ability to understand the archival potential of home and her scepticism about the redemptive possibilities of home for women "make her an interesting if not unique modern heroine" (Burton 133).

Malashri Lal proposes 'The Law of the Threshold,' an indigenous, analytical tool to look at Indian women's writing in English. She takes the spatial contours of Indian architectural practices as her premise to argue how entrances to homes, temples etc. are always sacrosanct spaces which extend to the metaphysical notions that govern human conduct, especially the conduct of women. According to her, the threshold is both a real and symbolic space, crossing of which indicates transition. The movement of men from the inner to the outer by crossing the threshold is rarely remarked upon or challenged while in the case of women the subversive act of crossing the threshold causes an irreversible change which either effaces the possibility of re-entering and inhabiting the interior or changes the terms in which it is inhabited. The threshold allows, "multiple existences for men, a single one for women" (12). Lal looks at the permutations of three possible spaces-interior, threshold and exterior to argue how the protagonists of Indian women's writing in English such as Geeta and Laila are located at the threshold as women who desire change which is "non dramatic to the public gaze," a change which is "gradual, almost imperceptible" (28). The law of the threshold not only helps in analysing the gendered spaces within the narrative, it also becomes an operative tool in the narrative technique in terms of the "social subterfuges that obfuscate the privacy of private spaces and make them public" (16). While there are extensive description of the architectural contours of the haveli, including the zenana, the narrative does not look deeply into the intricacies of intimate relations. Despite the focus on private space, the private remains hidden in the narrative universe of Rama Mehta and Attia Hosain who shrink from an uninhibited evocation of the desires and dreads of the female body. This is emblematic of the predicament of the Indian English writers who are tenuously poised between the

contrary pulls of traditional cultural values, and the language they adopt for creative expression, their fiction thus has a “double edge, nostalgia and rebellion” (165). Delicately poised between fiction and autobiography, Rama Mehta and Attia Hossain’s fictional narratives are oblique retellings of their own lives leading to narrative obfuscations. The female body in all its myriad possibilities and interdictions is the focus of Rasheed Jahan and Ismat Chughtai’s writings. While all four writers lay emphasis on the importance of education and shedding the physical and metaphorical veils and outline the daily acts of negotiation and possible defiance of purdah norms, Jahan and Chughtai are unequivocal in their rejection of purdah.

There is a “complex ethical and religious discursive web around female body” to make it adhere to the demands of a normative society. Examples that are set for women are of those who are “invariably located within specific spatial configurations” (Rekha 172). Rasheed Jahan, Ismat Chughtai, Rama Mehta and Attia Hosain, with a focus on the lived experiences of purdah clad women reveal how the narrative of oppression is insufficient to indicate the embodied nature of the social script and the various and varied meanings attached to it. Gender, class, caste, age, marital status etc. play a crucial role in determining the spatial construction of gender and gendered nature of space. As against Rasheed Jahan and Ismat Chughtai who offer a scathing indictment of purdah norms, Mehta’s Geeta and Hosain’s Laila are positioned at the threshold, as outsiders not completely sharing the values of the zenana and insiders who assume a defensive position in the face of attack and an elegiac tone at the prospect of the passing away of a shared past.

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Notes

¹ Cited by Iyengar, p. 7; ² Cited by Paranjape, p. xi; ³ Cited by Burton, p. 9.

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