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## Purdah of the Mind in the Poems of Indian-English Women Poets

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### **Abstract:**

A woman's birth is not desired, her youth is a cause of fear and shame, her marriage is a matter of concern, her motherhood brings her loads of responsibilities and her old age is a burden. She cannot express her wishes, hopes, fears, desires. She does not have access to basic freedom. The seemingly good society stifles the voices of women under the big veil of tradition, culture and social norms. It does not want the world to see women's tearful eyes, hear their pains, and have any sympathy for their miserable state. The present paper explores the role of the Indian English women poets in voicing the anguish of their gender against *purdah* of the mind.

**Keywords:** Veil, Screening, Custom, Conditioning, Tradition, Subtle, Patriarchy, Subjugation, Anguish, Rebellion.

### **Introduction:**

They have all been sold and bought  
The girls I knew  
Unwilling virgins who had been taught,  
Especially in this stranger's land, to bind  
Their brightness tightly round,  
Whatever they might wear,  
In the *purdah* of the mind.

(“Purdah-ii” *Postcards from God*, 18)

The last line of the above verse triggers the thinking process. The first question among the series of questions that pops up in the mind is related to ‘*purdah* of the mind’. What is it? The question is instantly followed by a trail of questions related to *purdah*. What is the poet, Imtiaz Dharker trying to convey through the term ‘*Purdah* of the mind’? Are there forms of *purdah* other than physical in real life? If yes, then what are the forms? Why is the poet relating the term ‘*purdah* of the mind’ with a particular gender?

The answers to the seemingly endless chain of questions require the unveiling of *purdah* in a subtle manner. The word *purdah* has its origin in the Persian word *Pardah* meaning “veil” or “curtain”. The syllable ‘par’ has come from the Persian *pari* which means “around, over” and ‘da’ means “to, place.” *Purdah* practice refers to religious and social norms for female seclusion prevalent among some communities. According to Oxford English Dictionary *purdah* is screening of women from strangers by a veil or a curtain in some Hindu and Muslim societies. Its practice as commonly understood involves the seclusion of women from public observation

by means of concealing clothing (including the veil) and by the use of high-walled enclosures, screens, and curtains within the home. Confinement to a limited place e.g. 'Haram', 'Antahpura' are also different forms of physical *purdah*. This confinement can be limited to a room, house or an area.

The above description of the term *purdah* makes clear that *purdah* is screening and it has different forms. One of the widely sung forms of *purdah* is physical. This form has been taken up as a theme by many literary artists and Sarojini Naidu was the first major Indian English woman poet to use it in the genre of poetry. Many of her poems contain the description of *purdah* and present its astonishing shades. Her poem *Humayun to Zobeida* shows veil as a symbol of romance. Another poem *The Queen Gulnar's Rival* presents veil as a fashion statement. *Palanquin- Bearers* presents *purdah* as a social custom. The opening stanza of the poem *Pardahnashin* presents veil as a symbol of ease and security but the concluding stanza reveals the sad aspect and in a subtle manner lifts the veil hiding woman's tears:

But though no hand unsanctioned dares  
Unveil the mysteries of her grace,  
Time lifts the curtain unawares,  
And Sorrow looks into her face---  
Who shall prevent the subtle years,  
Or shield a woman's eyes from tears?

(*The Golden Threshold*, 87)

*Purdah* has varied forms. Its Physical forms are sometimes used as a tool to control the mind as well as the lives of women. But this controlling of mind is done through other techniques also in different parts of the world not sparing women of any class, creed, race and religion. Since time immemorial patriarchy has used '*purdah* of the mind' as a tool to subjugate women. It draws a line for women which they are not supposed to cross. It knows so well that if they cross this line its dirty game will be over.

'Purdah of the mind' when used in relation with a particular gender, especially women means screening or veiling of the minds of women in such a way that they remain ignorant of their rights. It also means not allowing women access to education and conditioning of their minds in such a manner that they fit in their traditional roles. Thus, it becomes clear that '*purdah* of the mind' is not the creation of Imtiaz Dharker's fancy. It exists in real life. Another disturbing form of *purdah* is '*purdah* of emotions.' This form stops women from expressing their hopes, desires and wishes. These horrific forms of *purdah* corrode women's lives throughout the world. The real life incident that took place recently In Mohda (Raipur, India) is a burning example. On March 31, 2015, Geeta Prahlad, a *Sarpanch* of Mohda village in the Raipur district of Chattisgarh, defied tradition and lit the funeral pyre of her mother Surajubai. Although Surjubai had a son she wanted her daughter Geeta to perform the last rites. Two days later, Geeta was killed by her elder brother Santosh alias Tejram Verma and his younger son Piyush. They hacked her in full public view, angry with her for breaking the traditional role of a daughter and denying a son his right. Ironically, the same son had thrown his mother out of his house 22 years ago. Geeta was looking after her all these years. He did not perform his duties as a son when his

mother was alive but killed his sister, Geeta for doing something which every daughter should do to fulfill her mother's last wish.

The above mentioned concept of fitting in the traditional role is prevalent throughout the world. Jack Canfield and Mark Victor Hansen write that African American women are fifteen times more likely to get AIDS than their counterparts. One of the reasons is fear factor. An African American woman feels that she cannot "ask him to do something that would help protect her because he would get upset, and strike out at her," (*The Aladdin Factor* 26). Women are right from the beginning taught that they should not ask, and that they should take what they can get. This psychology is the greatest enemy of all women on every level of their lives: emotional, physical, sexual and financial. Every woman has stories about wanting and not asking, about accepting something that was less than what she wanted. It's really sad.

Patriarchy has since ages used *purdah* of the mind and emotions to control the lives of women and subjugate them. But it is wrong in assuming that it will continue to manipulate things in its favor. There is a huge group of people who is watching the dirty game of manipulation. This observant group is not a mute spectator. It reflects the pains and miseries of women through its writings. Among the members of the group are Indian English women poets. Women poets like Sarojini Naidu, Kamala Das, Mamta Kalia, Monika Verma, Eunice de Souza, Melanie Silgado, Imtiaz Dharker, Sunita Jain, Sujata Bhatt, Sujatha Mudayil, and Tara Patel have definitely not kept quiet. They have spoken against the horrific forms of *purdah*. They have mentioned their discontentment in their poems. Pre-independence poets have used a mild tone whereas post-independence poets have used the theme of *purdah* to rebel against the orthodox aspects of society and community, to resist and revolt against confinement and reduction of the inner and outer world of women. They have spoken against all those forms of *purdah* that become a taboo for their expression of emotions, joys and sorrows, hopes and desires.

The efforts of Indian English women poets against all kinds of oppression towards women can be divided into three steps. The first step involves writing about the lives of women their hopes desires, ambitions and fear. The second step involves giving words to the anguish of women and revelation of their pathetic state and the third step is a full blown revolt. In the poem titled *Suttee* Sarojini Naidu conveys her social consciousness:

Love, must I dwell in the living dark?  
 Tree of my life, Death's cruel foot  
 Hath crushed thee down to thy hidden root---  
 Shall the blossom live when the tree is dead?  
 Life of my life, death's bitter sword  
 Hath severed us like a broken word---  
     Shall the flesh survive when the soul is gone?  
                     (*The Golden Threshold* 46)

The poem brings to focus *Suttee Pratha* one of the prevailing social customs of the country in the nineteenth century, against which Raja Rammohan Roy raised his strong voice. The wife was to burn herself on the funeral pyre of her husband. The poet shows the pathetic condition and miserable life of a woman whose husband is dead. The wife is shown as torn between the deep

love of her husband, who is dead and her own life. *Purdah* of the mind imposed by the society and patriarchal structure in the pre –independence era had blocked the minds of people. The minds of married women were conditioned in such a way that they could not think beyond the set norms. A good and chaste woman was supposed to love her husband during his life and after his death irrespective of the chemistry in their lives. She was supposed to feel that her life ended with her husband’s life. In the poem, the widow uses the terms “*soul*”, “*life of my life*”, “*tree of my life*” for her dead husband whereas she gives herself the inferior status of “*flesh*”.

In another poem *Corn Grinders* Sarojini Naidu has shown the miserable state of widows:

O little bride, why dost thou weep  
With all the happy world asleep?  
Alas! Alas! My lord is dead!  
(*The Golden Threshold* 35)

Child marriage was a common practice in pre-independence era. Marriage of little girls at a very young age was a big reason of their misery. Now the question is that what kind of mental conditioning is there that makes even a little girl feel that her husband is not an ordinary human being but her “*lord*”? Why does the widowed “*little girl*” feel that her life has come to an end after her husband’s death? Why shouldn’t she move forward and come out of the trap of patriarchy? Probably, it is *Purdah* of the mind that stops her from seeing the truth that life keeps moving. The above lines from the lyric bring serious thoughts in some corner of the mind and are undoubtedly, a food for thought.

Tara Patel, a pre-independence poet in her poem *Woman* shows how patriarchy has made woman’s life a long saga of pain:

A woman’s life is reaction  
to the crack of a whip.  
She learns to dodge it as it whistles  
Around her  
But sometimes it lands on the thick,  
Distorted welt of her memory,  
Reminding her of lessons learned  
in the past.

(*Nine Indian Women Poets* 90)

A woman’s life is bound to be difficult because her birth itself is not desired. Her unwanted arrival in the world becomes a matter of concern even for her own people. Since, she makes an unwelcome entry she is cornered at every step. Eunice de Souza is dejected because of this trend. How preference is given to the male child is represented in her poem *De Souza Prabhu* .

Kamala Das, another pre-independence poet conveys through her poems that she was a victim of patriarchal prejudices and discriminations as most women are. She complains in her poem *An Introduction* about the pressures coming from her family members. She writes in her poems how she abhorred the traditional dresses that she was supposed to wear and the traditional roles she was forced to play:

Dress in sarees, be girl  
 Be wife, they said. Be embroiderer, be cook,  
 Be a quarreler with servants. Fit in---  
 Be Amy, or be kamala. Or, better  
 Still, be Madhavikutty. It is time to  
 Choose a name, a role.

(*Summer in Calcutta* 60)

Here wearing of *saree* for Kamala Das is a sign of pushing her back into her expected gender role. In the poem *Suicide* Kamala Das writes that a woman must pretend and act the role of “happy woman.” What an agony it is for a woman when she does not have any say in the decisions that make or mar her entire life! What is it that makes a woman so weak that she is unable to even muster the courage to convey to her own people that she is feeling suffocated? Probably she knows that either people will turn a deaf ear to her complaints or they will stifle her voice. This is surely one of the worst forms of *purdah*- ‘*Purdah of emotions*’. Sujatha Mudayil gives words to this agony of women in her poem *Who is She?* The poet presents a realistic picture of the state of women. There is a large chunk of society which is instrumental in making the lives of many women a hell. It is a lamentable fact that there is no stage of a woman’s life when she can lead her life peacefully and happily. There is no zone where she is spared.

The prejudices that women are facing may be in the destiny of their gender in general but they are aware of the fact that this gender destiny is not the creation of God but of the patriarchy. Since, it is man- made destiny some women do not give up. They talk to themselves to find a solution. They know that the solution lies in their minds and actions. Lost in the illusory happiness they may forget for some time their mission liberation but very soon they realize their aim. In the poem *Conflagration* Kamala Das says:

Woman, is this happiness, this lying buried  
 Beneath a man? It’s time again to come alive  
 The world extends a lot beyond his six  
 (*The Descendants* 20)

Monika Verma in her poem *Give me Space* says that she feels suffocated. The taboos imposed by patriarchy are unbearable. She demands some space for herself. The desire for space reflects woman’s strong desire for freedom from the clutches of patriarchy. Sunita Jain in her poem “*It’s a Promise*” expresses similar desire for liberation but with a determination:

I shall (it’s a promise)  
 sing once again  
 of all that you  
 my darling  
 killed.

(*Sensum* 143)

Tara Patel goes one step ahead and says that now it is time for women to react. The pain is unbearable and provokes her to rebel:

Then in rebellion she turned her face

to the whip,  
till pain became a river in flood  
wrecking vengeance  
(“Woman,” *Nine Indian Women Poets* 90)

The above expressions of Indian English women poets reveal the fact that *pardah* in any oppressive form is unacceptable. In fact it is detestable. These poets deserve a salute from all the humanists, literary artists and the lovers of literature for voicing their deep concern regarding the dark aspects of imposed *pardah* which envelopes the trauma of women and hides the tears that they have been shedding for centuries. Special thanks to these poets for entering the dark zone of imposed *pardah* as a beacon of hope. They have passed the torch of enlightenment and liberty from one generation to another. They have heard the sung and unsung pains of women through their highly receptive minds and have given them the shape of intense poems. Their words will keep ringing in the minds of many and motivate them to forward the message and help women get their basic rights such as freedom to think beyond the lines drawn for them, freedom to express their fears, discontentment, anguish, hopes and desires, freedom to give wings to their dreams and transform them into reality. These literary artists have performed the ideal social function of literature i.e. reformation of society. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow has rightly said “If you only knock long enough and loud enough at the gate, you are sure to wake up somebody.”

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